



# By the Rivers of Babylon (A Sermon)<sup>1</sup>

FRED GAISER

O daughter Babylon, you devastator!  
Happy shall they be who pay you back  
what you have done to us!  
Happy shall they be who take your little ones  
and dash them against the rock! (vv. 8-9)

How can this be in the Bible? How can we possibly get our minds around it? Bash babies' brains out? This is the word of the Lord? How can *anybody* get their minds around it?

Well, consider Rivkah. We meet her in the book of Lamentations. Not by name, since she is anonymous there. She is no one, and she is everyone. But as we reconstruct her story, we give her a name.

Rivkah—we would call her Rebekah—lives in Jerusalem, the Jerusalem of 2,500 years ago, a fortress city, protected both by its impressive walls and its mountaintop location. More, as Rivkah has been taught, as she has believed, as she has sung, this is a city protected by her God, who has chosen Jerusalem and its temple as his dwelling place.

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*Not all the Psalms are comforting; indeed some of them, like Psalm 137, drive us to the limits of what we might find acceptable in the Bible. But these hard words represent a hard reality of life too often known, and cried out in terror and anger. Indeed, God is in the midst of the traumas and tribulations of life, as the psalmist proclaims.*

So she tells her children—there are five now, the baby only a few months old—“We will be safe here. God will keep us safe.” The children need to hear her reassurance, because the city is under siege by the fierce armies of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, bent on adding one more name to his trophy wall, one more people to his list of conquests, one more act of vengeance against an upstart nation—and Judah is no match for Nebuchadnezzar’s might.

But God is a match, Rivkah thinks. The children are crying as they hear the sounds of battle outside, so she tries to comfort them by singing softly some of the songs of Zion she has heard and repeated so often at the great temple festivals in better days:

God is our refuge and strength,  
a very present help in trouble.  
Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change,  
though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea. (Ps 46:1–2)

Yes! “A mighty fortress is our God, a bulwark never failing.”<sup>2</sup> But the fortress cannot hold, the bulwark will fail. The siege continues as Nebuchadnezzar’s troops try either to break the walls *in* or starve the people *out*. A month, a year, two years, more. Nothing goes in or out, and the streets of Jerusalem become streets of gloom and death. Rivkah sings less often now. She has no strength for it, neither physical strength nor spiritual strength. Her song, when it comes, is not one of the hopeful songs of Zion but more often the dirge of Lamentations wondering whether God has “utterly rejected us” and is “angry with us beyond measure” (Lam 5:22).

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Food supplies have dwindled, and now they have ceased. The city has already consumed its donkeys, its dogs, and even its rats, but Rivkah’s children are still starving before her eyes. What will a compassionate mother do? One day, one terrible day, the little one succumbs. Starvation has taken its toll, and the baby lies dead in her arms. But four children remain, and still there is no food. What will a compassionate and desperate mother do? The book of Lamentations tells us, but we will wish it had not.

The children’s skin, we read, “has shriveled on their bones; it has become as dry as wood. Happier were those pierced by the sword than those pierced by

<sup>2</sup> Martin Luther, “A Mighty Fortress,” *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), #505.

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hunger, whose life drains away, deprived of the produce of the field. The hands of compassionate women have boiled their own children; they became their food in the destruction of my people” (Lam 4:8–10).

Can we stand to hear this? Can we imagine it? Could we dare tell Rivkah just to forgive those Babylonian soldiers she hears drinking and taunting beyond the city walls? Or her own leaders, whose malfeasance and apostasy have incurred the divine wrath?

Eventually, once Jerusalem has fallen and been razed to the ground—everything, including God’s own temple—Rivkah gets caught up in the deportation, the forced march of exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. On that journey, two of the girls die, and Rivkah must leave them along the side of the road, one of them still whimpering as the soldiers goad Rivkah along. Then, once they have arrived in Babylon, she sits huddled with her two remaining children in that strange land, far from home, far from God, it seems—at least, far from any God who promised all would be well. A Babylonian soldier approaches. She has seen him before, both back in Jerusalem and somewhere along the road, where he was one of those who participated in the gang rape that she has tried unsuccessfully to put out of her mind and that she knows still lives in her children’s haunted eyes. “Hey,” he says, “you there, Judean whore. Didn’t I hear you singing those songs about how your God would protect you and your precious Zion? Didn’t seem to work out so well, did it? But, hey, give us another chorus—unless you want us to give *you* something else.”

Now Rivkah has had more than she can bear: “Curse you!” she cries. “If there is a God, may God curse you for all eternity. You made me boil my baby. You made David and Hannah eat their brother. You made them watch their sisters die on the road. You held their heads and made them watch while you assaulted me. No child can recover from that. You have taken the light from their eyes, and only fear remains—fear and deep, dark hate. You have stolen their souls. Oh, yes, ‘Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!’ (Ps 137:9). Happy shall be the ones who kill your babies as you killed mine.”

Can we get our minds around this psalm now? Now, can we understand it? *How* could it be in the Bible? How could it *not* be in the Bible! One of the gifts of the Psalter—one of its terrible gifts—is that it allows the voice of every human emotion, every human cry, every human outburst, including those that arise from the most terrible depths of hurt and anger and bloodlust. That pain overwhelms, and the psalms refuse to hide it; they give it voice—and, in doing that, they turn it over to God.

Now, in Christ, the Psalms have been given to us to sing, to scream, to ululate, to cry. They are ours, and what will *we* do with Psalm 137? What we can’t do is say that things are different now. Humanity is certainly not different. We continue to violate one another, personally and politically, with swords and slurs, with clubs and curses. Babies still die, and outrage still goes unrequited. Can we, like our fictitious Rivkah, turn this over to God, even in words as terrible as hers?

I can imagine that the prayer of the mothers of the babies of Bethlehem murdered by Herod in his vain attempt to exterminate the infant Jesus might have

been similar. Can we condemn Rachel weeping for her children—as Matthew portrays this tragedy—even if her cry, too, includes those terrible words of Psalm 137? Others have prayed this way as well—those who lived in fear of tyrants of more recent history, like Hitler, Stalin, Mao, or Ho Chi Minh. Dictators who thought nothing of killing their own people and murdering completely innocent children. Might an echo of Psalm 137 be appropriate: “Lord, we put this in your hands. Lord, if it be your will—and we pray it is—Lord, strike them down”?

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And neither has God, at least not in the sense frequently claimed. We can’t chalk this up to the bad God of the Old Testament and bask now in the “nice” God of the New Testament. Who would want a God who could forget Rivkah, a God who does not weep and cry out in anger over the destructive acts of the oppressors around us and the damage done to ourselves and others by the oppressor who lives within us? “God, strike them down!” It’s a good and proper prayer.

No, God does not forget. But one of the things God remembers is that he is “gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love” (Ps 145:8, among others), that vengeance is God’s and God’s alone. What will this mean for Rivkah and for us? It never means—it cannot mean—that for God, sin and violence, oppression and evil do not matter. We don’t want a God who has put aside the divine wrath. The wrath of God does not mean that God had a bad day and sadistically pushed the “Smite” button on his computer. It means that God remains unalterably opposed to injustice and oppression, to the damage we do to ourselves and one another through the abusive manipulation of personal, political, economic, or religious power. We don’t want a God who does not care about such things. But where will God go with this? Can even God take us to a new place? We must return to Babylon, where, while Rivkah is screaming out the words of Psalm 137—properly so—God’s prophet stands beside her, reminding her and us that God can use Israel’s terrible suffering to open the eyes of the wicked to what they are doing, that they and we might “turn to [God] and be saved” (Isa 45:22). Yes, Israel suffers because of its own sin and because of Babylon’s evil acts, but also—and mysteriously, says Second Isaiah—Israel suffers for the sins of the world (Isa 53:4-6).

The prophet’s words are out there, doing their work as we skip forward about five hundred years: another day, another Rivkah—this one has become a follower of a Nazarene teacher who speaks boldly about God’s concern for justice

and righteousness, who also denounces tyrants, but who forgives and heals and transforms people's lives, who surprises them with demonstrations of divine grace and parables that make them see everything anew—and that, too, challenges the authorities and the status quo. So now, this new Rivkah stands with other women at the foot of a cross where the Nazarene is being put to death—not as a sacrifice to appease an angry God (Who wants that God?) but as a sacrifice to all the sin and sorrow, all the violence and vengeance, all the oppression and opposition that lives around us and within us, taking all of that with him to death on the cross—Jesus, who is God, taking all of that back to God.

As our new Rivkah looks at Jesus on the cross, she remembers her earlier namesake and the terrible things she and her children endured at the hands of evil Babylon, and she knows that Jesus now bears all those terrors as well. But she recognizes also the darkness within herself, and the darkness of the world in which she lives, and she knows that Jesus takes all of that, too, upon himself. She remembers how that prophet of old, that Babylonian Isaiah, had announced that Israel was called to be God's servant, to be wounded for the transgressions of the world, to bear the infirmities of all, to be bruised for the healing of the nations. That was Israel's terrible vocation. And as Rivkah looks up to Jesus, the light dawns, and she points to him, and she cries out, "Surely, *this* is Israel. This *one* is Israel, and this is the suffering that will make us whole."

And then she sees something else: this one dies not with words of cursing on his lips, but with words of forgiveness. "He does that for my ancestor Rivkah," she says. "He does it for me, where I could not." Yes, he does it for Babylon, he does it for Rome, he does it for the tyrants of our own time, he does it for all, he does it for you, he does it for me.

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*But now, in Jesus's death, we see a new possibility, a new way to deal with oppression and violence, with pain, injustice, and terror, by nailing it all to Jesus's cross, by committing it all to God, just as Jesus did in his last words, setting us free from our need to repay evil with evil.*

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Right, Rivkah, but this is no easy forgiveness, no cheap grace, no "There, there, it's all right." It's *not* all right, which is why Rachel weeps, and Jesus dies, and God's people continue to cry out in pain and lament. But now, in Jesus's death, we see a new possibility, a new way to deal with oppression and violence, with pain, injustice, and terror, by nailing it all to Jesus's cross, by committing it all to God, just as Jesus did in his last words, setting us free from our need to repay evil with evil. Now, like Rivkah of old, we don't have to *do* acts of hatred, because we have given our hatred to God in prayer. God takes all of this to the cross in God's son Jesus. God will do what God will with our prayers, our fears, our anger, the terrible realities within us and around us, so we can be at peace. That peace is our strongest

witness against the violence of the world. It allows us, in Christ, to overcome evil with good (Rom 12:14–21), and it allows us to sing again.

At the cross, Rivkah got it right. “Yes, *this* is Israel!” she said—Jesus is Israel—but then she added, I’m sure, “But, in Christ, so am I, so am I.” And, dear friends, so are we, so are we. Amen. ⊕

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