



From Lament to Joy

By Min. Sharon Prather

“By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept when we remembered Zion... For those who carried us away captive asked of us a song, and those who plundered us requested mirth, saying ‘Sing us one of the songs of Zion!’ How shall we sing the Lord’s songs in a foreign land?”
(Psalm 137:1, 3-4, NKJV)

The year 2020 has been traumatic. The COVID-19 virus is ravaging the land seemingly holding the entire world captive. Cases are rising daily. Record deaths are mounting. At the time of this writing, over a quarter million cases have been recorded in America. So many negative events are occurring that I have to ask: How can we celebrate Christmas with joy during a pandemic?

Psalm 137 recounts the lament of the nation of Judah. Captured by Babylon in 536 B.C., Judah was in bondage for 70 years. During that time, the people became homesick. Their tears flowed as swiftly as the rivers where they sat. Yet the Babylonians were oblivious to Judah’s plight. Not only did they ask the captives to sing, but they asked them to sing songs of amusement and laughter! “Sing us one of the songs of Zion!” the Babylonians cried. But Judah could not respond because of her sorrow. Judah wanted to return home.

Christmas is just around the corner. Each Christmas, we delight in singing carols about the birth of Jesus Christ. But this year, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has issued guidelines for holiday celebrations and small gatherings to help prevent the spread of the coronavirus (<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/daily-life-coping/holidays.html>). The guidelines recommend that people avoid singing when in small groups and minimize playing music, for fear that the music will invite a sing-along. The guidelines indicate that, when people sing, respiratory droplets from their mouths enter the atmosphere causing the virus from an infected person to spread to other people. Safety is important, but how can we *not* sing the Lord’s songs in a *foreign land*?

Judah was homesick; Americans are homesick, too, wishing for an end to COVID-19 and a return to our lives, activities and traditions. Such a return to normalcy would be a great gift. However, because of the pandemic, traditional large family holiday gatherings will be smaller this year. Empty chairs will remind us of friends and loved ones stricken by the deadly virus. Visits with elderly parents and grandparents not seen since March will be postponed. The expectation of comfort from a warm hug will be met with a fist bump or elbow bump. Nevertheless, I’ve come to the conclusion that we can still have joy in the midst of sorrow. Nehemiah 8:10 says, “The joy of the Lord is my strength.”

Joy denotes a feeling of great pleasure and happiness. The joy we can have as Christians is the joy of Jesus. Three things I’ve learned about *Jesus Joy*: (1) **Jesus is our source of joy.** True joy can only be found in Jesus, not in pleasure, fame or unbelief; (2) **Jesus joy is stable.** It remains in us and is constant; and (3) **Jesus joy is sufficient.** It is complete (Jn. 16:24). The people of Judah may have eventually moved beyond their homesickness and come to experience joy while living in captivity. It’s

not entirely clear. But we can be sure that joy is available to us today, throughout this holiday season and always, even during a pandemic.

So I leave you with this thought: Ephesians 5:19 (NKJV) says to speak “...to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord.” If we can’t sing Christmas songs together this year, we can surely sing them in our hearts. Let one of those songs be “Joy to the World,” for Jesus is our joy. Merry Christmas!