

Biblical authority in Babylon

By [David Williams](#)

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Not everything that I encounter in my exploration of a text makes its way into a sermon, and recently, one particular "remainder" stuck with me. [The passage was from Jeremiah, a prophetic word to the exiles in Babylon.](#) Live your lives, he says. Be a blessing, particularly to those who have oppressed you.

Pray for the wellbeing of those who have oppressed and enslaved you, says Jeremiah. It's a word of fierce grace from a prophet best known for anger and lamentation, which is striking enough.

But what struck me hard about this text was it's juxtaposition with the psalm that I chose *not* to use in the responsive reading the Sunday before. The lectionary had assigned [Psalm 137](#), which is one of those passages that I just can't use unless I've screwed up the courage to preach on it.

Particularly if you're having the congregation read it responsively. When the folks in the pews choke out that last line about happily smashing children on a rock, you'd better have some interpretive sermon magic planned right quick.

The juxtaposition of those two passages, just a week apart in my studies and meditations, was particularly striking because I had never considered the two together before. And they're in radical and irreconcilable tension with each other.

One seethes rage and pain, and yearns for vengeance. The other, speaking into exactly the same context, says: constrain your fury. Do not desire vengeance. Be the good. Seek the good.

I personally have no problem here, mind you. To the ears of my soul, Jeremiah is the one who speaks for God here.

The anger of the psalm is the rage that burns in the hearts of those who are broken and oppressed. It articulates that truth, and in that, the song of pain and loss has some validity.

But the "happiness" it hungers for in its final verse does nothing to bring healing. The result of its yearning would only be more sorrow.

[From my interpretive framework, Jeremiah's letter has clear authority over the psalm, and the psalm must yield to it.](#)

But if you believe that both are equally and completely true, both the Word of God, perfect and right and with equal authority to govern our souls, you have a problem.

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