

Better Not Bitter
Psalms For Living

Last week we considered the wisdom found in Psalm 138. It's all about gratitude – the “attitude of gratitude” that brings us the joy of life. Keeping track of all the good that has come your way and giving thanks to God and the people who are part of it, brings more satisfaction and joy to life than continually listing all that has gone wrong or that is not good. One who constantly focuses on what is not good in life is one who is constantly unhappy.

I mentioned last week that there are two kinds of people in the world: those who say “thank you” and really mean it; and those who do not. It is so important to develop an “attitude of gratitude” in our living, but also so very hard.

The challenge for us is that our souls need constant reminders to be thankful because it does not come naturally to us. We have this broken condition called sin that we were all born with. It causes us to focus solely on ourselves and prevents us from living with grateful hearts.

Therefore, thankfulness must be cultivated in our lives. When cultivated, an “attitude of gratitude” brings us the blessings that God intends for our lives. Gracious living flows from living with gratitude. Becoming a better person will mean developing an “attitude of gratitude.”

Learning From The Past

Our memories tend to soften the edges of trials and tribulations in our lives and that's a good thing. Most of us could probably confess that our pasts are not filled with all sunshine and lollipops. Sometimes remembering the past can be a painful thing. The loss of a loved one, a broken relationship, broken families, our own misdeeds or mistakes, 9-11 for our nation, these mass shootings we see on the news. These are things that cause us to wince.

The Bible tells the story of God's people and God's action in our world and history. The Bible is brutally honest: it does not whitewash the painful, shameful, stories of what humans have done to humans. Psalm 137 is one of those honest depictions. By the same token, there have been many times when the world and history have not been kind to God's people. Yet the Bible also tells of God's people who remained faithful to Him, acted righteously, in spite of the unkindness they received at the hands of God's detractors.

I reported last week that some biblical scholars believe that Psalm 138 is an expression of thanksgiving of those Israelites who returned to Jerusalem after captivity in Babylon. After their distress (including the journey home)

they bowed down toward the place of the holy temple and thanked God. Today let's consider Psalm 137 which tells part of the story of God's people. In many ways it is a counterpoint to Psalm 138.

To understand what this Psalm is all about we need to go back in history. In the year 587 b. c. Israel was a small, but proud, and once powerful kingdom; now overshadowed by the empire of Babylon, to the north, and the ever-present power of Egypt to the south. When David and Solomon were kings Israel was large. But a civil war split the nation, and the northern half was eventually swallowed up by the empire that preceded Babylon (722 b. c. by Assyria). Now only the tribe of Judah and Benjamin (named the nation of Judah) was left. During this nearly 350 years of Judah's existence as an independent kingdom, they had 20 different kings. Eight of these kings were known for "doing what was right in the sight of the Lord." The other twelve were characterized by "doing what was evil in the sight of the Lord."

Because of the Israelites' disobedience, God began warning that judgment was coming, but they refused to repent and turn from their sinful ways. In the year 604 BC, the Babylonians invaded Judah and carried nearly 10,000 people off to captivity. Daniel and Ezekiel were among those taken.

Then in 587 BC, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon brought his army against Jerusalem and destroyed the city and the temple of the Lord. Their king and all the leaders, and all the craftsmen, and skilled people, were taken as captives to Babylon, where they lived in exile. (You can read about this in the Bible – 2 Kings). For the Israelites, Jerusalem, built on Mt. Zion, the city of their hope and the center of their worship, was no longer a source of joy, but a well of bitterness and sorrow. In exile, along the banks of the Euphrates River they wept when they remembered Zion.

Stuck in Despair

Psalm 137 expresses the feelings that many (if not all) people have at one time or another. If you've ever been hurt by someone, betrayed, let down, abused, or disregarded you have likely experienced some of these feelings. When those feelings are paramount here's what can happen to us:

1. We get stuck in the past and fail to see the future - "...we remembered Zion..." There on the banks of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers in the land of Babylon, under the weeping willows, they remembered how great things were back in Zion, but had no hope for the future. They weren't homesick – their home was gone! Through their tears they couldn't see that they were exactly where God had placed them and this situation was only there for a season.

When things look bad, when you're really hurting, it feels like the pain will last forever and it is hard to trust that God has hold of the future, as well as the past. Yet He still performs miracles and still has a future planned for us. We need the Bible to remind us when we're down.

2. We get overwhelmed by the situation and simply gave up – “...there we sat down...”

They did not pray! They did not plan! They did not praise! They just sat down and gave up! Sometimes pain paralyzes ... and it's not just physical pain. Get up and take a few steps.

3. We let our emotions control our behavior – “...there we sat down and wept...” There's nothing wrong with crying! It's therapeutic. But how long will you cry? I guess as long as it takes... But as long as they cried to each other, instead of crying to God, they could not see God's plans for them. Unbeknownst to the Israelites their captivity was only for a season. After it accomplished what God intended, the people would once again be miraculously delivered to go home. What is God teaching you in your time of difficulty, pain and sorrow?

4. We lose our song - “Upon the willows ... we hung our harps.” They retired their strings. They gave up praise all together. They allowed their situation to take away their song. When you lose your song, you lose hope. Our victory lies in the fact that we can praise God and sing of His goodness.

Dragged Down By Despair

So often when we are wronged and suffer grief or sorrow, our immediate reaction is to return hurt for hurt and we feel justified in doing so. Ever feel that way? You want to get even for what has happened to you. Some call it justice, some “getting even,” but many times it's just revenge. Little thought do we give to the seeds of bitterness that are planted in anger...

Psalm 137 certainly echoes this emotion. Here's the words borne of despair: **“Daughter Babylon, doomed to destruction, happy is the one who repays you according to what you have done to us.”** Happy is the one who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks,” Psalm 137:8-9. The Israelites' desire for revenge against their captors was strong; their emotions brought them down to the level of their enemy's barbarity – dashing children against the rocks.

Despair's temptation is to enter victimhood, to blame others for misfortune, to seek retribution. Each one of the mass shootings we hear about illustrates the brokenness that is in the human soul that finds it's outlet in rage and violence. Some who perpetrate these horrible things are genuinely mentally ill – they need help. Others harken to voices of frustration, hate, and destruction. America is plagued by organized victimhood and identity politics that plays on the natural and base desires of people. They are far from God.

The Israelites in Babylon were unable to recognize God with them in their terrible circumstances. It's hard isn't it to turn to God when everything falls in on you? They were his chosen people, purposed to be a model and witness to God for the rest of the world. Unfortunately, when their captors demanded

they sing the songs of Zion, they refused to do so in a foreign land, thus missing their best opportunity to evangelize and show forgiveness to their heathen masters. **What opportunities have you been given to forgive?** How many opportunities have we, as First Church, missed to share Jesus with our neighbors?

Fortunately for Israel and for us, in time those captives in Babylon heeded the visions and words of the prophets Ezekiel and those who spoke in the name of the great Isaiah. Once again they harkened to the leading of God and Psalm 138 – a psalm of gratitude – became their song.

The More Excellent Way

The Scriptures fulfilled in Christ teach us a better way. **Blinded with tears of bitterness, sorrow, and anger we can easily miss the better way.** Recall Mary Magdalene, on the first Easter, coming to Jesus' tomb only to find it empty. With tears flowing down her face she was unable to recognize the risen Jesus. Then the amazing transformation occurred when he called her name – her weeping turned to joy. She was connected once again to the Lord.

When we think about our past there may be moments of pain. Our Savior knew of pain and suffering. He willingly took it all onto himself to bear away our sins on the Cross. Our bondage to sin died with Him on the cross. In the midst of his agony, hanging on the cross, the people around him heard him say, "Father forgive them for they know not what they do."

There is a story that Barabas – you know the man Roman Governor Pontius Pilate set free in place of Jesus – watched from afar as Jesus was crucified. Someone in the crowd asked him, "Who is that man on the cross?" Barabas answered, "I don't know him. I only know that he is on the cross in my place."

What wondrous love is this that the Creator should humble himself, even to death on a cross, to be our Redeemer? **All our past and painful experiences are taken up into his sacrifice and redeemed by his love.**

Shall trouble and hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger of sword defeat us? ***"No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord,"*** Romans 8:37-39.

True believers can't give up. **What we feel is a setback is only a setup for the Savior to step through.** Don't give up for good and great things often take time. Get around people that are going to increase your faith in the LORD. Start today, stay focused, read Scripture, sing God's praise. God will do His part to increase your passion, but He also expects you to do your part.

This is the life the apostles learned from Jesus and the life they taught each new disciple. It is the life we still hold dear and seek to share all around

us. St. Paul wrote: “But now you must also rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips”

Colossians 3:8. St. James tells us why: “... because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires,” James 1:20

By his example Jesus showed that love is stronger than hatred; forgiveness is more powerful than revenge. Healing is more precious than condemnation and anger. Our new covenant with our Creator – sealed in Jesus’ blood - is not written in a contract. It is written on our hearts. Last week we had Holy Communion to remember Him, what he has done for us, and who he is. We eat the bread as though making him our daily bread. We drink the wine as though his blood flowed through us. May His body and blood strengthen us in our commitment to be his people, to follow his lead in all moments, even in moments of pain and grief.

Take hope in Christ. He can make you better, not bitter. He will make you able and worthy to be His witnesses here and beyond.