

POWERFUL MEMORY AND FORGETTING

Psalm 137: 1-9 and Matthew 5: 38-39 and 43-48— Pastor Richard P. Carlson

Painful memories teach us all. All of us have painful memories. In our painful memories there are lessons to help us in the present and future. The psalmist in Psalm 137 was remembering. Many believe this unknown psalmist was a Levite who returned home to Jerusalem—and released to go home by King Cyrus. The Holy Spirit inspired him to recall a painful memory of the 70 long year exile. This psalm begins with tender, moving pathos—the Jews seated by the river in Babylon weeping. Vs. 1-4 recall a painful memory. Vs. 5-6 recall patriotic devotion the Jews felt in the strange land of Babylon. Vs. 8-9 is a call for God’s vindication in a passionate desire for Babylon to be judged for what they did to the Jews, unspeakable horror—raping women, ripping open pregnant women and dashing Jewish children against the rocks. Verse 7 is about the Edomites laughing at the plight of the Jews. In 712 BC, 175 years before Psalm 137 was written, Isaiah, prophesied Babylon’s fall. Isaiah 13:15-19 says, “Their infants will be dashed in pieces before their eyes; their houses will be plundered and their wives ravished... And Babylon, the glory of kingdoms, the splendor and pomp of the Chaldeans, will be like Sodom and Gomorrah when God overthrew them.”

Weeping in Jerusalem, like this weeping of this unknown psalmist, is still going on today in Jerusalem. The Wailing Wall, or the Western Wall, is a 187-foot-high section of the ancient wall of Herod’s Temple, the second temple built on that spot. Jeremiah foretold the mourning or “wailing” of Israel going on yet today: “This is what the LORD Almighty says: “Consider now! Call for the wailing women to come; send for the most skillful of them”” Jeremiah 9:17. “Cut off your hair and throw it away; take up a lament on the barren heights, for the LORD has rejected and abandoned this generation that is under his wrath” Jeremiah 7:29. The Jews rock back and forth yet today, wailing for Messiah to come to vindicate the Jews for all their troubles—including six million Jews who were slaughtered by Hitler.

What are all the Jews sobbing about? Is it only because the wall is broken down or for Messiah to come? Or is it a grandpa crying for the future of his grandchildren? Is it a parent pleading for a child to find a marriage partner? Is it a barren woman praying God will open her womb? Is it a sister of a soldier killed in the Israeli Defense Forces or is it because a child was killed in a terror attack? God knows and He hears our cries, as He heard the Psalmist’s lament. God hears the cries of every one of us who are struggling with the impossible challenges of life. Verses 4-6 sound like the psalm was written during the exile in Babylon. Verses 7-9 sound like the psalm was written in Babylon too, but in deep anticipation of God’s judgment on Babylon and on Edom for gloating over the fall of Jerusalem. But

verses 1-3 contain words in the past tense used by the psalmist. It sounds like he is writing from Jerusalem and is looking back on what happened there—reliving the years of exile and what happened there. This painful memory was because Judah ignored the warnings of the prophets and kept on worshipping idols. The Jews lost their honor and reputation and the joy of living in Jerusalem for 70 long years, but not their national pride. What Babylon did to the Jews was brutally unspeakable, as the Edomites, Esau’s brother and his nation, laughed at the plight of Jacob, the Israelites in Jerusalem and Judah. The Edomites cheered Babylon on to destroy the Holy City. That’s the issue in Psalm 137. What 4 lessons can our painful memories teach us when those memories open up old and terrible wounds?

PAINFUL MEMORIES OPEN UP WOUNDS, BUT RECALL TO OTHERS VICTORIES GOD HELPED US OVERCOME. (I.) Psalm 137: 1-4 states, By

the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our lyres. For there our captors required of us songs, and our tormentors, mirth, saying, “Sing us one of the songs of Zion! How shall we sing the LORD's song in a foreign land?” The Jews sat to mourn, and the psalmist remembered, as a weeping participant, being part of the exiles of Judah who wept by the willows in Babylon, where they hung their harps. This memory being told after the fact to their children or to other Jewish families who stayed behind to keep the vineyards, this memory was biting to the psalmist. Apparently, the Babylonian captors and guards demanded that they sing one of the songs of Zion they were renowned for singing. Jews can sing and dance to the Lord as David did, but how could they do this before these cruel Babylonians in this strange land. These Babylonians knew well how the Jews honored Mt. Zion and the holy city of Jerusalem, how they boasted in their songs about Zion’s strength and security. Now with the city of Jerusalem and the temple in ruins, the guards were mocking the exiles, in essence, saying, “Where is your God?”

The psalmist recalled how they refused to comply with this demand to sing sacred psalms of praise to entertain pagan captors. Their heart wasn’t in it. This demand opened up this old wound so deeply painful in their hearts, because all their homes and their house of worship were destroyed. Was it some of these very captors who threw their own babies like eggs against the temple walls? These captors had ripped open the pregnant women and raped those who weren’t pregnant. They had killed many young men like they killed King Zedekiah’s own sons, then gouged out his eyes, put him in chains, dragging him off with tens of thousands of captives to Babylon. They disobeyed their Babylonian captors’ commands—they wouldn’t sing for them in this strange land. There are times when each of us are unable to sing—the pain in our soul is breaking our hearts. Letting others know of this awful memory, including our children is a marvelous way of bringing praise to God for what he has brought us through. For our children to hear us tell them some of the

incredible sagas God has brought us through is so needed in our homes. For our children or our grandchildren to hear even one of our authentic stories of God rescuing us, and see tears streaming down our faces, but radiantly singing to them, what a victory we now have to sing about. “Here we are in Your presence, lifting holy hands to You, Here we are, praising Jesus, for the things You brought us through.” God help us, like this psalmist to remember the pit God pulled us out of and God help us sing and write songs to God again today. Secondly,

PAINFUL MEMORIES BUILD CHARACTER, TEACHING US WE MAY NOT APPRECIATE BLESSINGS UNTIL WE LOSE THEM. (II.) Psalm 137:

5-6 states, “If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget its skill! Let my tongue stick to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you, if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy!” The psalmist went on telling his story—and I think those that heard him tell his story as he sang this psalm, I believe they were seated on the edge of their seats. Dads and Moms that don’t let their children know their vulnerabilities—who don’t confess to them their weaknesses, will often reap children who can’t open up to them because they feel they don’t measure up. It’s vulnerable parents who tell their story to their children and to others who listen, it’s those parents who learn that those who humble themselves will be exalted. (James 4: 10) It may be painful to tell others how you had to lose something precious before you really learned to appreciate it. The Jews had been idolatrous and disobedient—wanting to cover all their bases by supplementing their worship of God with worshipping idols. Most of all, they mourned the loss of worshipping God in the temple. This psalmist recalled in his psalm how he dropped his idolatry in Babylon and how he vowed to God in exile that he would always remember Jerusalem and make it his highest priority and his highest joy. This was his way of saying, “I won’t forget You, Lord, my great “I Am!”

Long before he prayed his strong desires against his captors, this psalmist judged himself for his own idolatry that had brought God’s discipline of him in Babylon. He even asked God to punish him if he failed to keep his vow. What a lesson this painful memory taught him—let it teach us too. It’s a character lesson we often learn too late. We don’t miss the water til’ the well runs dry. We don’t appreciate our parents, our children, our teachers, our doctors, or our pastors until they are gone. Moses said to God in Psalm 90: 12, “So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom.” Maybe this psalmist is the same unknown psalmist who sang in Psalm 66: 13-14, “I will come into Your house with burnt offerings; I will perform my vows to You, that which my lips uttered and my mouth promised when I was in trouble.” Have you and have I kept our vows we made to God when we were in trouble? Was the psalmist asking God to give him paralysis in his right hand and in the roof of his mouth? It’s possible, but I believe he is saying, rather, I call down a judgment on myself. If I go back to idolatry, if I forget God and

worshipping Him in Jerusalem, let me no longer be able to play my harp, and let my mouth no longer be able to sing any song. Let my right hand forget its wonderful skill and let my tongue stick to the roof of my mouth. Don't miss that this psalmist first calls down His judgment on himself, before turning his memory to his enemies. God build our character to judge ourselves strongly before we would ever dare to call out for judgment on our enemies. Thirdly,

PAINFUL MEMORIES HELP US TRUST GOD TO DEFEND US WHEN WE HAVE BEEN MOCKED AND BRUTALIZED. (III.)

Psalm 137: 8-9 is strong! "O daughter of Babylon, doomed to be destroyed, blessed shall he be who repays you with what you have done to us! Blessed shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock!" These two verses have been fodder for the enemies of God who are at war with Him and with His Word. It's true that the law God gave to Israel was based on lex talionis, the law of retaliation, not revenge. It means to pay back in kind. In short, the punishment must fit the crime. Our courts today still follow that principle. If we are honest, there may even be some of us here today who know the Lord, who have thought about brutal killings by terrorists, ISIS, or folks with bombs, and thought, "May you be blessed—meaning morally justified who gives it back to them. May you have your head cut off as you taught your 12-year old son to do it so he would be a man in your eyes. Do believers think that way today? Perhaps more than we admit. We know this psalmist was inspired of the Lord to let us in on his thought life as an exile in Babylon. You may remember I told you that Isaiah, many years before, had prophesied this pay-back would happen to Babylon to repay her for her extreme brutality and horrific inhumanity to the Jews. The psalmist may well have known about Isaiah's prophecy in Isaiah 13 and perhaps he was only asking God to hurry up and fulfill His Word. Jeremiah prophesying against Babylon, in Jeremiah 51: 56 said, "For the Lord is a God of recompense. He will surely repay." Whatever you may think about this psalmist who probably saw his daughters raped, who perhaps saw his pregnant wife ripped open to kill both her and the baby, this psalmist who saw his baby or babies thrown like pumpkins and dashed wide open on the rocks, be sure he wrote before his Messiah was come, he thought that way before Jesus came born of a virgin. Fourthly,

PAINFUL MEMORIES SHOULD BECOME FOR US A CRY FOR JESUS. (IV.)

"Remember, O LORD, against the Edomites the day of Jerusalem, how they said, "Lay it bare, lay it bare, down to its foundations!" Now as we looked at the enemies of God, we all heard what Jesus said about loving our friends and hating our enemies. He said in Matthew 5: 44, "But I say to you, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." As I think of the psalmist back in Jerusalem anticipating and desiring and hoping God will soon repay Babylon, I live on the other side of Calvary. For me, Psalm 137 is a cry for Jesus. But God has opened

my eyes to perhaps the hardest part of the text, verse 7 and not verse 9. This psalmist was still reeling from his own brother, if you will, the Esau-ites, the Edomites, for Esau and Jacob who were twins, these Edomites were cheering on the Babylonians as they cruelly brutalized Jerusalem. It started as a clique between Rebekah and Jacob against Isaac and Esau. It started with a couple, a husband and wife, not being open with each other. Why were they keeping secrets? A clique is “an exclusive set of persons, a circle of exclusive friends.” It may start in a family with favoritism of parents to a child, making one a favorite and another one the black sheep. Sometimes cliques begin with children picking sides with one parent and shunning another. It’s the road to a split, to divorce, and in its worst form, to the enmity that still exists worldwide between the Jews and the Arabs—between Judah and Edom. What’s true in families happens countless times in churches.

Almost every church in the world has cliques, small groups of people who exclude outsiders. Our human natures without the help of Jesus, desire to exclude and control. Cliques develop selfish agendas, preferences, and exclusions. Sadly, even believers can gloat if someone excluded from their clique, is suffering. It’s the Edomites rejoicing in Jerusalem, as the Judaeans, the sons of Jacob, suffered. As a shepherd, when I see a clique or a power block form in our church or in our district, I wince and cry for Jesus to wipe out the clique so we can all love each other again. One person wrote about her church, “I just couldn’t fit in. I loved the worship. The messages were Christ-centered, the congregation was growing, but try as I might—I served on a team, I joined the church’s Bible school, and I went to the prayer meetings—I just couldn’t fit in. I wasn’t the only one. It was a common malady among new members. We were welcomed with open arms but kept at arm’s length. The people who launched the church are a near-impenetrable bunch of passionate believers. But they are very selective about who they let into their inner-circle.” Well, one thing is certain—our church has no original members. Are any of us in a clique? We know inside our spirits if it’s true of us. God knows! Were there cliques in the early church? Yes! Acts 6:1 tells the story of a church clique between Jewish widows and Gentile widows, who were being neglected. It was causing frustration and murmuring. God hates this. Ephesians 2:14 states, “For He Himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in His flesh the dividing wall of hostility.”

As we cry to Jesus as we read this psalm, *Here are some Biblical pointers to keep us from starting or continuing to stay in a church clique. Cliques are contrary to the loving unity intended to be shared among Christians.* (1) 1 Corinthians 1:10 -- “I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment.” 1 Corinthians 3:3 -- “For you are still of the flesh. For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and

behaving only in a human way?” **Cliques create discord and disunity, which the Lord hates.** (2) Proverbs 6:16,19b – “There are six things that the LORD hates, 7 that are an abomination to Him:” # 7—“And one who sows discord among brothers.” Matthew 12:25 – “Jesus said to them, “Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, and no city or house divided against itself will stand.” **Cliques provide an atmosphere where gossip and backbiting thrive.** (3) Psalm 38:12 – “Those who seek my life lay their snares; those who seek my hurt speak of ruin and meditate treachery all day long.” **Cliques often result from a feeling or pretense of superiority, due to pride.** (4) Romans 12: 16 – “Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Philippians 2: 3 – “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves.”

Excluding others is choosing to be handicapped, for we all need each other. (5) I Corinthians 12: 21-23 – “The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and on those parts of the body that we think less honorable we bestow the greater honor.” Romans 12: 10 – “Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor.” Philippians 2: 3 – “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves.” 1 Timothy 5:21-- “In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and of the elect angels, I charge you to keep these rules without prejudging, doing nothing from partiality.” James 3:17 --But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be entreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy.”

In excluding others, cliques exclude Jesus. (6) Do you remember the words of Jesus Himself when He spoke of the coming day He would divide the sheep from the goats, true believers from unbelievers? What did He say about excluding others? It’s a mighty warning! In Matthew 25:42-46, Jesus said, For I was hungry and you gave Me no food, I was thirsty and you gave Me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome Me, naked and you did not clothe Me, sick and in prison and you did not visit Me.’ Then they also will answer, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to You?’ Then He will answer them, saying, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, You did not do it to Me. And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.” **Consider how you would feel if others excluded you from their clique.** (7) Cry to Jesus. Jesus said in Luke 6:31, “And as you wish that others would do to you, do so to them.” **Fight for unity!** (8) Romans 15: 1 states, “We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves.”

I close with Chris Rice's song that fits our theme. It's "Come To Jesus!" Weak and wounded sinner, Lost and left to die, O, raise your head for love is passing by, Come to Jesus, Come to Jesus, Come to Jesus and live. Now your burden's lifted, And carried far away, And precious blood has washed away the stain... so Sing to Jesus, Sing to Jesus, Sing to Jesus and live. And like a newborn baby, Don't be afraid to crawl, And remember when you walk sometimes we fall... so Fall on Jesus, Fall on Jesus, Fall on Jesus and live. Sometimes the way is lonely, And steep and filled with pain, So if your sky is dark and pours the rain... then Cry to Jesus, Cry to Jesus, Cry to Jesus and live. O, and when the love spills over, And music fills the night, And when you can't contain your joy inside... then Dance for Jesus, Dance for Jesus, Dance for Jesus and live. And with your final heartbeat, Kiss the world goodbye, Then go in peace, and laugh on glory's side... and Fly to Jesus, Fly to Jesus, Fly to Jesus and live." Let's pray!