

## Remembering Gratitude

Jeremiah 29: 1, 4-7

Luke 17: 11-19

Hardship and gratitude are difficult bunk mates. When things head south on you, it's pretty normal to have that drag your spirits down, and your day along with it. Hopefully, we can brush off the minor things. The jerk in the household who puts in the new toilet tissue roll backwards ought not be the ruination of our day. A fender bump that puts a little paint ding or even a minor dent in your bumper is irksome, but nothing with any meaningful effect on your day.

We can slide along the scale of negative experiences pretty far before we start hitting those items that do ruin the day. Having your car breakdown and get towed to the mechanic when there was a full day of activities is a real day-killer and maddening, too. When the mechanic tells you the part won't be available for several days, and you're stuck without wheels, that *really* stinks.

Of course, we can slide up the scale to life-changing damages and losses, some of which seem senseless, random, cruel, and unfair. This is where people's ability to cope gets maxxed out. It isn't that they're weak or failed or lacking commitment or anything else. They simply come to the end of their resources. Without help or hope, they become endangered and their well-being is imperiled. It's amazing what people can do when faced with something so difficult, and the courage that gets summoned is truly heroic. But some of what people have to face is really staggering.

Going back to what I said in the beginning, hardship and gratitude are difficult bunk mates. They don't come together like peanut butter and jelly. Forcing them into alignment isn't too effective either. However, one can be in a position where there is either gratitude to compliment hardship, or else despair can quickly ensue. Once you launch over the edge of despair, there are a whole raft of uglies that come out to make a big, fat mess of things. What we can find is that gratitude and hardship are necessary companions that can bring a sense of balance, as odd as it may seem.

That could be part of the motivation behind Jeremiah's counsel in his letter to the exiled Jews in Babylon. Jeremiah shares the message of God with them. It may seem like obvious counsel, but see how the message begins. It starts with God's explicit claim that they are in Babylon, exiled from the Holy City Jerusalem and from the Promised Land, because that is indeed what God wanted. The text is addressed: *to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon*. If they had any doubt about why they were in Babylon, why the City of God was now occupied by a pagan conqueror, and why they were so far removed from the historic promise of God, this letter ends any speculation. **It is God's will.** The hardships that they've endured were authored and approved by God.

They're told, 'deal with it,' in effect. *Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce.* Settle in, people. This is going to be your home for a long spell. Get used to being in a foreign land.

God's word continues with a second instruction: *Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease.* Implicit here is the promise that God's work is continuing among his people, even though they have been exiled and estranged from the Promised Land. Raise up new generations in this strange place because **God's promise is still working**. You may not be in the Promised Land, but God's promise is bigger than that specific covenant.

Finally, there is this third instruction: *But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.*

The first instruction seems a bit of common sense; get used to exile, make your home and set up shop there. The second teaching affirms God's faithfulness to his covenant with his people, albeit in a new context under captivity. However, this third instruction must have been a bit baffling. The exiled people are commanded to *pray to the Lord on [behalf of the well-being of Babylon]*.

This would be the same Babylon that destroyed their nation, razed the Holy City – Jerusalem, sacked the Temple – the House of God, whose warriors slew thousands, including the family members and neighbors of those exiled, seized their land, and carted them off to spend the foreseeable future in captivity. Pray for those people, your conquerors, and pray for their nation, says God.

This instruction must have provoked some interesting comments from those hearing it. It probably got the same reaction as Jesus' instruction to pray for one's enemies. It's one thing to get reconciled to being stuck there in Babylon for a long while. And it's another thing to have hope in the promise of God that is still working itself out, even in this terrible situation. But it seems way out of bounds to be praying for the welfare of the people and the nation that has conquered and devastated your people.

God's message has made it clear that their welfare as God's people is completely bound up in the welfare of the people who hold them captive. Their instruction to pray for the Babylonians serves a couple of purposes.

God has pointed them toward the future. The past is past and is never mentioned, you'll notice. What's been done cannot be changed; God's promise lies ahead. Things will not be the same going forward; all has been irrevocably transformed. That's the direction to which God's people must be oriented – forward, ahead, into whatever the future brings. They'll only stay oriented correctly if they live out a new faith in their God, trusting in the promise of God to be fulfilled.

Further, they remain within the covenant of their God despite the tragedy that has befallen their tiny nation-state. The punishment foretold by the prophets came to pass, but the promise of God remains. The concern to continue building their families

includes the raising up of new generations of those who would seek to be faithful to their God – not to the Babylonian gods, but to their God, Yahweh.

The faithful among them will recognize that this people of God need to discover a way to come before God in gratitude. Despite their hardships, their suffering, dishonor, and enslavement, they would be led into despair unless they can come before God and discern within themselves a spirit of gratitude. Of course, it's going to take time, but we've already stated several reasons why gratitude is appropriate.

Whatever happens to us, our way has to be pointed forward into God's promise. When we feel like we've been beaten and carried off into some captivity, our faith needs to draw us back into the presence of God, to develop within us a spirit of gratitude over time. That spirit of gratitude has the power to heal the blindness that prevents us from seeing how God's promise is still working in our lives. Eventually, we can begin seeing our path forward with new eyes, with a new vision, firmly planted within God's promise.

The stars only shine in the dark, true? Navigators find their bearings from the stars in the dark and then can move forward confidently. Instead of cursing the dark, God's people are called to seek the stars in God's firmament, get their bearings, and move forward into God's new promise for you.

In the story of Jesus' healing the ten lepers in Luke, it's more straightforward. Ten lepers have come out to meet Jesus, pleading for mercy, or in essence for healing. Jesus doesn't actually heal them at that point. He gives them a direction, pointing them in the direction of the priests. It was *during* their journey to the priests that they are healed. One of them, upon realizing that he had been healed, decided to turn back. While praising God, he throws himself at Jesus' feet in gratitude. To add a nifty layer of irony, this one who returned was a Samaritan, the people despised by the Jews.

Jesus remarks, *'Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?' Then he said to him, 'Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.'*

The Samaritan who returned was healed like all the rest, their lives restored to wholeness and participation with the people of God, no longer ostracized and condemned. But only one was moved with a faithful spirit, a spirit of gratitude. It should be so easy when things go unexpectedly well. Yet we see what happened.

The nine surely rejoiced and celebrated their blessing, continuing on their way to the priests. They had sought healing and they gained healing. They got all of what they sought – to be cured and restored to the community.

But one, a Samaritan, rejoiced and celebrated his blessing, too, but he turned aside from the way that all the rest pursued. This one was different. A spirit of gratitude captivated him and brought him to Jesus to give thanks. His change of spirit and his return in gratitude got him oriented to God's promise for him. This new believer sets off on a different path from the rest. Where the others had sought a healing that would

bring them liberation and new life, the Samaritan's gratitude brought him to recognize that the healing alone was **just the beginning** of liberation and new life. Discovering not simply healing, but Jesus, the Son of Man, is even more. It is a transformation for one who had not been among God's chosen people. Now he understands. Now he knows love. Now he knows grace. Now he knows Jesus. He is set on the Kingdom path unlike the others who were glad to get what they wanted.

Jesus' final words to the healed Samaritan seem odd at first. They were all ten cleansed of their leprosy, and Jesus knew it had been done. Though it was completed, Jesus' final words to this man are: *Rise and go; your faith has made you well.* It really seems out of sync; the guy has already been made "well." Or else the translation is weak. The Greek verb here is *sozo*, "saved." What Jesus said was: *Rise and go; your faith has saved you, or your faith has brought you salvation.* His spirit of gratitude brought with it a reward that was never expected, and something the other nine never received. The nine were healed of disease, but the tenth, the Samaritan, received new life in the Kingdom of the Lord.

Life's twists and turns can be received as different opportunities to re-assess, re-orient, and forge ahead, moving forward into God's new promise for you. What that path and promise is exactly, and how you get there, I don't know. But I'm confident your faith will lead you into healing *and* the new life promise of the Lord. The path lies ahead, in the future, in the promise of our loving and gracious God.

Babylon may be a place of hardships and difficulty, but if that's where God has planted you, you may find it's a place in which you can ultimately thrive within the promise of your loving God.

Remembering a spirit of gratitude can turn the faithful away from despair and into the hope that God would join to our lives in blessing.