

It's Hard To Be “With Church” When You Don't Like Where You Are.

John 13:34-35

“A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.”

Worship is not about being happy but about being present and real with God.

Most of us would agree that singing worship songs in our gatherings is important. But do we realize just how important those songs are to our growth as believers? In a New York Times article entitled "In One Ear and Out the Other," Natalie Angier examines the limited power of human memory. She points out that while we can't quite seem to remember the birthday of a loved one, we can't quite forget every word of the Gilligan's Island theme song. Why is that? It seems that if you add a little music to something, it's more likely to be remembered. That's how the brain is wired to work. Angier writes: Though scientists used to believe that short- and long-term memories were stored in different parts of the brain, they have discovered that what really distinguishes the lasting from the transient is how strongly the memory is engraved in the brain.... The deeper the memory, the more readily and robustly an ensemble of like-minded neurons will fire. This process, of memory formation by neuronal entrainment, helps explain why some of life's offerings weasel in easily and then refuse to be spiked. Music, for example. "The brain has a strong propensity to organize information and perception in patterns, and music plays into that inclination," said Michael Thaut, a professor of music and neuroscience at Colorado State University. ...

A simple melody with a simple rhythm and repetition can be a tremendous mnemonic device. "It would be a virtually impossible task for young children to memorize a sequence of 26 separate letters if you just gave it to them as a string of information," Dr. Thaut said. But when the alphabet is set to the tune of the ABC song with its four melodic phrases, preschoolers can learn it with ease.

In other words, the hymns or choruses we sing—which combine Scriptural truths with moving melodies—teach us things that won't easily be forgotten. That should probably give us pause—pause to reflect on the value of what we have in the hymnals tucked away in our pews; pause to revisit what is being projected on the screens that line the front of our worship auditoriums; pause to remember that God has given us a powerful tool in music and its potent relationship to human memory. Brian Lowery, managing editor, PreachingToday.com; source: Natalie Angier, "In One Ear and Out the Other," www.nytimes.com (3-17-09)

It's hard to worship when you don't like where you are.

"By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion. There on the poplars we hung our harps, for there our captors asked us for songs, our tormentors demanded songs of joy; they said, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"

It's hard to worship through tears. That was the Psalmist's experience. In [verse 1-3](#), he describes his situation: **"By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion. There on the poplars we hung our harps, for there our captors asked us for songs, our tormentors demanded songs of joy; they said, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"**

This is a Psalm of exile. It is a lament for Jerusalem. "We wept when we remembered Zion," the Psalmist says in verse 1. Zion is the name that refers to the hill of Jerusalem, the city of David, and the site of the temple. Zion: the place where God reigned as king. According to David in [Psalm 132](#), it was the place God had chosen for his dwelling. It was the place he promised to bless with abundant provision. God promised to satisfy her poor. He promised to clothe her priests with salvation. "And her saints will ever sing for joy," [Psalm 132:16](#) says. Yet three hundred years after David wrote those words, the unthinkable happened. Jerusalem's song was cut off. The Babylonian army captured the city and carried its inhabitants into exile. [Psalm 137](#) laments the taunting from the captors.

It's possible the captors were simply interested in the strange ways of these people who had been transported to Babylon. They might even have thought they were helping them to "Keep your chin up! Look on the bright side!" Or possibly, they were saying, "Let's hear you sing about God's blessing on Zion now that it has been reduced to rubble."

The kind of problem the Psalmist describes, of course, is not confined to the Babylonian exiles. It's something that you and I experience. It's something that can be seen even in the church. The church, believe it or not, is strangely intolerant when it comes to grief and discouragement. Oh, we recognize that it's normal to feel badly when there has been some set back, some loss. We expect you to feel a measure of grief. But then we expect you to move on, and rather quickly. If you get stuck in your grief, well, it's just awkward. C. S. Lewis writes about this in the journal he kept after his wife died. Published under the title *A Grief Observed*, it describes the awkwardness and discomfort others felt when they became aware of his grief. "I cannot talk to the children about her," Lewis writes. "The moment I try, there appears on their faces neither grief, nor love, nor fear, nor pity, but the most fatal of all non-conductors, embarrassment. They look as I were committing and indecency. They are longing for me to stop." Lewis found that his friends were no different.

It is ironic that those who worship the one the Bible describes as "a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief" can be so impatient of those who are overcome with grief. Frankly, this affects the way we worship. Evangelical worship suffers from an emotional bias: it is disproportionately upbeat. Our worship has a low threshold for pain. Come to the place of worship with the sorrow showing on your face in some churches, and you are liable to be subjected to a tongue lashing by some well meaning person from the platform who urges you to leave your troubles at the door, plant a smile on your face, and put some enthusiasm into the songs. Those who say such things have good intentions. But read the Psalms. Along with the moments of great joy—there are also many that are filled with lament.

What do you do when you come to the place of worship and find that you just don't have the heart to sing? You do what the Psalmist did. You hang up your harp and admit to God that you don't have the heart to worship. Notice the honesty of the Psalmist's question in verse 4: "How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land?" He's not asking this question because he expects God to give him an apologetic for worship. He expects God to agree with him. Or at least, he expects God to understand his point of view. *Of course you can't sing! Who could sing under circumstances like these? This isn't a time for singing. This is a time for weeping.*

If it's too hard to worship through your tears, then perhaps you should try to worship God *with* your tears. It may not be the worship you would like to offer God, but in that moment it is the best worship that you could offer. A weeping heart is your true heart and that's what God wants: your true heart, not your presentable heart; your true face, not your best face.

But what happens when there is more than grief keeping you from worship? What do you do when your disappointment isn't just with your immediate circumstances? What if your disappointment is with the "new normal" circumstances have thrust upon you? What do you do when it looks as if your best days are behind you and things are never going to be as good as they once were?

It's hard to worship when the past seems better than the present.

"If I forget you, O Jerusalem, may my right hand forget its skill. May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth if I do not remember you, if I do not consider Jerusalem my highest joy."

One of the temptations we face when our pilgrimage of faith descends into the valley of disappointment is the tendency to dwell on the past. It is hard to worship God in the present when you are convinced that your best years are behind you. That is the perspective the Psalm writer is struggling with. He dwells on the past. He refuses to leave the memory of Jerusalem behind and vows to regard it as the height of his joy: **"If I forget you, O Jerusalem, may my right hand forget its skill. May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth if I do not remember you, if I do not consider Jerusalem my highest joy."**

You would think that singing the songs of Zion would be a way of keeping the memory of Jerusalem alive, but the Psalmist thinks differently. Under these circumstances, singing Zion's songs seems like an act of unfaithfulness so repugnant that the Psalm writer essentially calls down a curse on himself.

When we have suffered a great loss, it is not uncommon to feel ambivalent when emotions other than grief begin to reassert themselves. At the outset of loss we can't feel anything. We are so stunned that we experience only numbness. We go through our day like someone walking in their sleep. We feel like spectators of our own lives, watching from a distance. When the first crushing weight of grief sets in, we can feel nothing else. But that eventually changes. Grief doesn't fade, exactly, but it slowly begins to give way to other emotions. The change comes quietly, without fanfare. You will be in the middle of some task and suddenly realize that you feel normal. You catch yourself in a laugh or enjoying some television show, and you are surprised—surprised and a little guilty. That's how the Psalmist feels. He doesn't want to lift up his voice and sing the old songs as if nothing had changed. He doesn't want to move on. What makes the Psalmist's words doubly poignant is the possibility that they may have been written after God's people were restored to Jerusalem. Some Bible scholars point to the language of verses 1-3, which seem to view Babylon from a distance, as evidence that this lament was written soon after the return from Babylon in 537 BC. If that's true, then this is the lament of someone who has been trying to pick up the pieces of a lost life and realizes that things will never be the same as they once were. Jerusalem is still there, but the shining city of memory is gone. For that reason, the Psalmist cannot bring himself to come to terms with "the new normal." He would rather see his hand wither and choke on his own words than sing the old songs of praise.

Some of us know what that feels like. Maybe it's the loss of a job or the breakdown of a relationship, perhaps a major change in our health, or even the resignation of your pastor. Whatever the change, we find ourselves dwelling on the past. The temptation, of course, is to idealize the past and turn it into an unrecoverable golden age. This can happen even when the "new" normal is actually better than the "old" normal. Even when our circumstances change for the better, we may still find ourselves longing for the past. The new normal seems so unfamiliar, so disorienting.

The trouble with the past, of course, is that while it's a nice place to visit, you really don't want to live there. The past that you long for is probably not the past you actually experienced. What you are longing for is not what you lived through but an idealized vision of the past—one that adds light to the dark shadows of your experience and softens the harsh glare of reality. That is the truth of the matter.

But I want you to notice that in his prayer the Psalmist says nothing about this. He doesn't chide himself for dwelling on the past. He doesn't tell himself that his memory of the way things were is better than the reality. He doesn't give himself a pep talk and urge himself to come to terms with the present. He simply expresses his grief and disappointment to God. That's because grief is more than an emotion. Grief is a process. Grief is landscape that you traverse. It is possible to get to the other side of grief but not without moving through the valley. And it's hard to sing the songs of Zion when you are descending into the valley. It's hard to worship when the past seems better than the present.

So what do you do when you feel like your best years are behind you? When you would rather dwell on the past than face the present? You do what the Psalmist did. You hang up your harp and pour out your grief to God. You tell him just how disappointed you are. And do you know what you call it when you make such a bold admission to God in a place like this? Worship. It may not be the worship you would like to offer God. But in that moment it is the best worship that you can offer. A disappointed heart is your true heart, and that's what God wants.

But this begs a question: Just how far can we go with this kind of honesty? How far is too far, and how do we know when we have crossed the line? If we are to take the Psalmist as our example, the answer must be that we can go much farther than we think, because the sentiment that the Psalmist describes in verses 7-9 is one of the most disturbing in all of Scripture. Yet as troubling as they may be, his disturbing words point to one of the most common obstacles to worship that people wrestle with.

It's hard to worship when you are waiting for justice.

“Remember, O LORD, what the Edomites did on the day Jerusalem fell. “Tear it down,” they cried, “tear it down to its foundations!” O Daughter of Babylon, doomed to destruction, happy is he who repays you for what you have done to us he who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks.”

The Psalmist's words demonstrate that it's hard to worship when you are waiting for justice. It's hard to worship when you're waiting for God to get even with your enemies. It's hard to praise God when you're waiting for him to act as judge.

In [verses 7-9](#), the Psalmist turns his attention to those he holds responsible for the "new normal" with which he has been forced to cope. First, there are the Edomites: those descendants of Esau who watched with glee as the Babylonians destroyed the city of Jerusalem. Verse 7 says: "Remember, O Lord, what the Edomites did on the day Jerusalem fell. 'Tear it down,' they cried, 'tear it down to its foundations!'"

The Edomites were Israel's longstanding enemies. They were a problem for the nation Israel from the very start. After Moses led Israel out of Egypt, he sent messengers and asked permission to pass through their territory on the King's Highway but the Edomites refused. Saul, Israel's first king, fought the Edomites, as did David and many of the kings of Judah. So when the Babylonians finally sacked Jerusalem, it was the Edomites who acted as cheerleaders. The Psalmist asks God to remember their words and by implication to deal with them accordingly.

In [verse 8](#), the Psalm writer shifts his focus from those who rejoiced over Jerusalem's fall to those who did the work of destruction. At this point, the Psalmist stops addressing God altogether and addresses the Babylonians directly. In [verses 8-9](#) he says, "O Daughter of Babylon, doomed to destruction, happy is he who repays you for what you have done to us—he who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks." It is at this point that we are tempted to wonder whether the Psalmist has gone too far with his honesty. It is vs. 9 in particular that some see as being so out of place. Should this even be in the Bible, let alone a Psalm of worship? It is the brutality of this verse that makes it a stumbling block; it is often classified as one of the "hard sayings" of the Bible.

Some, like Augustine, have tried to soften the impact by spiritualizing the Psalmist's words. According to Augustine the "little ones" mentioned here are the sins that spring up within us that must be dashed against the rock of Christ. That hardly does justice to the context.

In reality, the Psalmist's words are neither hard to understand nor are they surprising. The key to understanding them is found in verse 8: "happy is he who repays you for what you have done to us." He wants what every parent whose child has been victimized wants. His cry is the cry of the father whose daughter has been sexually molested. It is the implicit desire of all those who question God's existence because of the brutal genocide of Rwanda and Darfur—those who say, "If God exists, how can he let such things happen?" It is the voice that says, "Justice must be served. Somebody needs to pay!" The Psalmist's cry is the cry of the prophet who stations himself on the ramparts and waits to hear God's reply to his questions: "How long, O Lord, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you, 'Violence!' but you do not save?" The Psalmist's cry is the cry of the martyrs under the altar in Heaven who call out in a loud voice: "How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?" ([Revelation 6:10](#)).

John 11:32-39

When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. "Where have you laid him?" he asked. "Come and see, Lord," they replied. Jesus wept. Then the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?" Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. "Take away the stone," he said. So why are we so surprised to find these verses in the Bible? Is it because we are afraid these harsh words will provide ammunition for those who would say that the Bible is untrue? If anything, these words should do the opposite. If they say anything about the Scriptures, they testify to its stunning truthfulness. These words of the Psalmist,

disturbing as they are in their painful honesty, show that while we may lie to ourselves, God will not enable us in our self deceit. God will not lie to us! The Psalmist's cry is our cry too, whenever we find we have been cheated, when we are slandered, when the boss takes credit for our work or blames us for his failure, when our spouse squanders the love that is owed to us on someone else. *This is our heart's cry.*

It is not because we think they are out of place that these words bother us, despite what we claim. We know instinctively that this is exactly what we would say if we were in the Psalmist's shoes. No, what disturbs us is to find such true words in God's word. What disturbs us is the terrifying possibility that such words might ultimately be found upon the lips of God. Because just as we know instinctively that this is exactly what we would say if we were in the Psalmist's shoes, we also know instinctively that the cry for justice is a sword that cuts both ways.

The story is told of the time a woman came to Ibn Saud, the first king of Saudi Arabia who reigned from 1932-1953, and demanded the death sentence for the man who had killed her husband. The man had been gathering dates in a Palm tree, when he slipped and fell to the ground. He landed on the woman's husband and killed him. Ibn Saud asked the woman whether the two men had been enemies and whether the fall had been intentional. The woman couldn't say. She didn't know why the one man had fallen. What she did know was that according to the law, she could demand the man's blood in compensation. "In what form will you have the compensation?" the king asked. The widow wanted his head.

But the king was reluctant. He pointed out to the widow that what she really needed now that her husband was gone was a means of support. She needed money, but by demanding a life for a life, which was her right, instead of accepting monetary payment, neither she nor her children would profit. But the widow was insistent. She was determined to exact vengeance and refused to change her mind. So Ibn Saud said, "It is your right to exact compensation, and it is also your right to ask for this man's life. But it is my right to decree how he shall die. You shall take this man with you immediately, and he shall be tied to the foot of a palm tree and then you yourself will climb to the top of the tree and cast yourself down upon him from that height. In that way you will take his life as he took your husband's." Then, after a pause he added, "Or perhaps you would prefer after all to take the blood money?" The woman took the money.

Conclusion

Like this widow, the Psalmist's demand for justice is understandable. But it is also awkward. What justice requires of others it also eventually demands of us. This is what troubles us about this Psalm. We know this is exactly how we would pray given his circumstances, just as surely as we know that we dare not pray it. Indeed, there is only One who could have dared to pray these words without fearing the consequences, but One who, in his darkest moment, chose to pray a very different prayer.

Jesus Christ, who had not only the power but the right to call upon a legion of angels to avenge him, instead prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." How do we explain this? It is because Jesus alone understood what justice requires. What justice requires, Jesus alone provides. His is the only blood price that justice accepts.

And do you know what you call it when you come into God's presence so broken by the way others have sinned against you that all you want from God is payback, but instead

you pray something different because you are covered by Christ's blood? What do you call it when you bless those who curse you? When you pray for those mistreat you? Well, you call that a miracle. You call that grace. You call that mercy. And, yes, you call that worship.

For what do you want payback that by the blood of Jesus you can give to God?

Memory Verse:

“How can we sing the songs of the LORD while in a foreign land?”

Psalms 137:4

My Next Steps Today are to

Worship God by not asking for payback for

Worship God by asking God to bless

Worship God by praying for this person who mistreats me

Worship God by taking another step in life through my grief.