

The Root of Your Character

I would like to read two passages of scripture: one from Psalm 137 and the other from 2nd Corinthians, the 4th Chapter, selected passages.

“By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and we wept when we remembered Zion. We hung our harps on the willows, for our captors required of us a song, and our tormentors required of us fun and mirth, saying, ‘Sing us one of your songs of Zion!’

“How shall we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land? If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither! 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!”

Now I would like to read from Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians: “Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart. For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake. For it is God who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness.’ . . . But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. For while we live we are always being given up to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our mortal flesh.”

Strange words. In my mind, the two texts are about the same thing. They tell us about the issue of character.

Let’s first discuss Psalm 137. This was one of the first organized strikes. The Hebrews were told by their enslavers, “It is now time for you folks to play

your harps and your lyres. It is for our enjoyment.” And what did the text say? “We sat down.” Is that not a strike? “We hung our harps on the willows...” and refused to play.

Psalm 137 says this is a deeply religious right: The right to say, “I will not.” That is what all strikes are based upon. The strike, therefore, is potentially a religious event – religious in its reaffirmation of the essential character of the person. That character is largely dependent upon the person’s right to say, “yea,” and to say, “nay.” And when persons sign away their right to say, “No,” they have been robbed of their character. In saying “yes,” I must not surrender my right to say, “no.”

The next part of this text says that they had a reason, a reason of substance, for not doing. It left them the freedom, therefore, to take a position on things that were critical for them. When you surrender those rights, you might as well go somewhere and close the door, because it is over for you. So many people, in a society like ours, surrender this right for means of security. I see people accommodating to friends. They are making the great compromise and they know it. They don’t understand that they are paying an awesome price, and that they have the right, if they could know it, to hang their harps on the willow and say, “No I will not sing the song.”

The captors of the Hebrews knew that if they could get them to surrender this right, they would have succeeded in getting them totally under their control. But the enslaved also knew it. They said, “No! How can we sing the Lord’s song here? How can we sing the Lord’s song when you don’t want to hear Zion’s song?” I think it is one of the most amazing places in the Bible. They said, “We must remember, so we will just keep quiet.” And then they went to the root of character, and the foundation of religious formation, and personality formation. They went to the core of it, and they said, “How did we get here in the first place? We got here because we have avowed commitment to God.” That is the only reason we are over here. And they said: “The songs you were trying to get

us to sing were the songs that we would sing as affirmation. Those were the songs that we sang as we affirmed God's goodness to us. Those were 'inside' songs; those were songs we sang among ourselves to God; songs that God and we knew in a special way, because they were about what God has done with us, and for us."

And then they said: "If we forget that experience, we might as well not be able to talk, or to write, or to eat, or to pick up the harp off of the willow, ever again to play." They said: "If I forget thee, Oh Jerusalem, let my tongue cleave to the top of my mouth, and let my hand lose its cunning (its articulation) and let it wither away." They said, "I will be ruined if, for expediency, I can forget the highway to God. It will make me palsied."

Remember what Martin Luther said? He said the same thing when he nailed his statements to the doors of the church. He said: "Here I stand. You have pushed me as far as I am going to go. I can do no other."

It is the same thing isn't it? Where are those people now? People today – you push them here, and then you push them over there. When do they say: "No! No further." Where are those Christians? Where are those people who have any sense of social justice, who with their own lives say: "I have taken enough." I don't see many of them.

What did the forefathers say? "Show me what measure of injustice you will acquiesce to, and I shall show you the measure of injustice that will be visited upon you." Who said that? Frederick Douglass said it. He told us that a long time ago.

Now there is another idea expressed in Paul's second letter to the Corinthians. He said, "We have this treasure in earthen vessels to show that the transcendent power belongs to God, and not to us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; we are perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed." Paul is talking about a magnanimous

quality of character. It is a quality we see displayed in those slaves in captivity. They are persons placed in earthen vessels. But through their act the world will know that as those earthen vessels break down under the brutish whip of the master's lash, they did not act because they were gods, or strangely different human beings. They acted because they tied their fragile, transient bodies and spirits to the transcendent, timeless Spirit of God. And that is why their act has meaning in history.

Paul says, "We have this treasure." What treasure? We have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the world will know. Will know what? If the average television or newspaper writer today would write about the slaves in captivity, they would say, "They were a special kind of people." No. "We have this treasure in earthen vessels, but this transcendent power does not belong to us, but to God." They heard like we hear, but they stood firm. Not to be tossed at any point. They dug in, and said this is it. "We will not sing our songs." There is a point beyond which we will not go. And we will not defame that which yesterday was a certainty.

There have been witnesses to what I'm talking about. The master said to the Black slaves: "If you don't act right and conform, I will kill you." Do you know what they said? "Before I'd be a slave, I'd be buried in my grave." They had their strength in earthen vessels that the world might know that the transcendent power belonged to God. They did not accommodate and compromise. They acted with a character that reflected eternity in time, and through their acts, they allowed the world to know of a God who could inform life with eternal dimensions.