

PICKING UP THE PIECES

Today's Text: Jeremiah Chaps 32-34

Extracts:

- 1. Now when I had delivered the purchase deed to Baruch the son of Neriah, I prayed to the Lord, saying: ... “You have said to me, O Lord God, ‘Buy the field for money, and take witnesses’! - yet the city has been given into the hand of the Chaldeans.” Then the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah, saying, “Behold, I am the Lord, the God of all flesh. Is there anything too hard for Me?” [Jer. 32: 16, 25-27]**
- 2. Thus says the Lord: “Again there shall be heard in this place- of which you say, ‘It is desolate, without man and without beast’- in the cities of Judah, in the streets of Jerusalem that are desolate, without man and without inhabitant and without beast, the voice of joy and the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, the voice of those who will say: ‘Praise the Lord of hosts, for the Lord is good, for His mercy endures forever’” [Jer. 33: 10-11]**

The Saints is one of the teams in the American National Football League (NFL)¹. Last year, Hurricane Katrina extensively destroyed New Orleans, including the Superdome where the Saints played its home matches. As a result, the team was forced to play its home matches in places like San Antonio (Texas), Baton Rouge (Louisiana) and Rutherford (New Jersey). As a team without a home, it struggled all last year with only 3 wins against 13 losses. As part of the reconstruction of New Orleans, US\$185 million was pumped into the 31-year-old Superdome. Then, on Monday, 25 September 2006, the Saints played its first home game this year at home. What an emotional moment! It was watched by a national television audience of almost 11 million and over 70,000 local fans. Much more, the Saints beat the mighty Falcons (of Atlanta) 23-3!

For the Saints and its teeming New Orleans fans, they are picking up the pieces again. They are looking up to better days ahead. How about you? Have you recently suffered a setback that is weighing you down? Are you feeling lost and thinking that it is all over? In today's lesson, the children of Israel faced similar circumstances but God asked them, “Is there anything too hard for Me?” [Jer. 32: 27]. If you are ready to trust God to deal with your situation, then today's lesson is for you!

¹ Based on ‘Saints give big Easy something to cheer,’ Associated Press, <http://msn.foxsports.com/>; and http://sportsillustrated.cnn.com/football/nfl/recaps/2006/09/25/2020_recap.html

1. When the cookie crumbles!

“*Have you seen her*” (1970) by the Chi-Lites is one love song that remains a classic. It tells the story of a young man who had broken up with his woman (girlfriend or wife). It begins with a sad monologue. The young man is recalling wonderful moments that were now no more. Intermittently, he returns to soulful monologues. In one part that has stayed with me, he cries out painfully, “I thought I had her in the palm of my hands.” The reality is that she has gone. The cookie has crumbled!

There is hardly anyone of us who has not experienced some disappointment. It could be failure in love, marriage, business or exam. It could be an accident in which our loved ones are crippled or killed. It could be the death of a family member, friend or colleague that is very dear to us. It could be an unexpected job loss. Whatever it is, we are left with a void. Things appear to have fallen apart, into pieces that we cannot immediately put back again. Our minds race with doubts and unanswerable questions: “Why me?” “Why now?”

Some people commit suicide or attempt one. However, most of us are cowards who are even too scared to die! Nevertheless, we all agonise, trying to deal with the following issues, among others:

a) *Shock and pain*

Some people might have anticipated what finally happened. For example, the signs and warnings were there all along but they did nothing about them. You were driving too fast. Therefore, that accident was not far-fetched. You did not pay attention to your partner’s needs or complaints. Therefore, that split was inevitable. You had been moving with the wrong people. Therefore, that embarrassing arrest and indictment was knocking all the time. On the other hand, it was sudden and unanticipated. There were no warning signs at all. You studied so hard for that professional exam and yet you failed unexpectedly. You were looking forward to an enjoyable retirement only to be told too late that your employer was going bankrupt and had not made payments on your behalf into the retirement fund. Whatever form it takes for the cookie to crumble, you are left with shock and pain.

There is nothing wrong with feeling the pain. The only people who cannot feel pain are those with “no-pain” diseases, such as CIPA (congenital insensitivity to pain with anhidrosis).² For example, persons suffering from one such disease (FD or familial dysautonomia) are unable to produce tears and hence always have severely dry eyes.³ Therefore, you

² A. Chris Gajjilian, ‘World without pain is hell, parent says,’ www.cnn.com/2006/HEALTH/conditions/01/27/rare.conditions/index.html

³ Ibid.

need to let off steam by shedding some tears! A good example was David's reaction to the destruction of his camp in Ziklag by the Amalekites [1 Sam. 30: 1-4]. David and his men were not there when the raiders came. By the time they returned, they found that their camp had been "burned with fire; and their wives, their sons, and their daughters had been taken captive." Did they feel the pains? Yes for "David and the people who were with him lifted up their voices and wept, until they had no more power to weep." Therefore, you should let it out; don't bury it within because it is dangerous to your health!

b) *Need to pick up the pieces*

Some of us may grieve for a short time. Some others may grieve for a life time. No matter your reaction to your predicament, you will have to do something about it sooner or later. Some people do a self-appraisal, to know what they did wrong and how to avoid it in the future. Some people may do an analysis of their situation just to know who (but themselves) to blame. Some others are not keen to "re-open past wounds" but would rather forget them and move on. The truth is that you may never be able to explain or understand it.

When your cookie crumbles, it may be helpful to go to experts and professionals who are experienced and knowledgeable in the field of your affliction. However, if you don't know what is wrong with you, how can you know whom to see? That is where God comes in. He is the *first* 'expert' to go to for "the Lord is near to those who have a broken heart, and saves such as have a contrite spirit" [Ps. 34: 18]. For example, if God had not revealed it to Joshua, how would he have known that the defeat of the children of Israel by tiny Ai was due to the sin of Achan during their attack of Jericho [Josh. 7: 1-22]? That is why it is advisable to *first go to the One who knows everything about all things*, that is, the Lord God. That was what Joshua did. [vv. 6, 7] Before doing anything about his situation, David "strengthened himself in the Lord his God" [1 Sam. 30: 7].

Let us examine the circumstances that faced the children of Israel during the time of the prophet Jeremiah and learn a few principles on how we can pick up the pieces of our broken lives.

2. Picking up the pieces: some guiding principles

At the time of our story, King Zedekiah had imprisoned the prophet Jeremiah in the king's house (a kind of maximum security prison) for daring to give messages and warnings that threatened state security. The prediction came to pass when Nebuchadnezzar's army from Babylon poured into the kingdom and captured its capital city, Jerusalem. Zedekiah the king and his officials, as well as other

citizens, were on the verge of being taken into exile in Babylon [Jer. 32: 1-5]. Jeremiah summarizes the nation's gloom and pain as follows [Lam. 1: 1-3]:

How lonely sits the city that was full of people! How like a widow is she, who was great among nations! The princess among the provinces has become a slave! She weeps bitterly in the night, her tears are on her cheeks; among all her lovers she has none to comfort her. ... Judah has gone into captivity, under affliction and hard servitude.

The nation of Judah had gone to pieces, so had the way of life that the people had been used to. Their cookie had crumbled. The future looked bleak. How were they going to pick up the pieces?

From the Bible text under consideration, we can discern the following principles that would guide the recovery of the nation and people of Judah:

a) *Seek God's word on your situation*

God told Jeremiah, while he was still in jail, to buy a piece of land from Hanamel, his uncle's son. The prophet was confused. How could he buy a piece of land in a place that was going desolate? So, he went back to God in prayers and asked, "You have said to me, O Lord God, 'Buy the field for money, and take witnesses'!-yet the city has been given into the hand of the Chaldeans." God replied, "Behold, I am the Lord, the God of all flesh. Is there anything too hard for Me?" [v. 27]. God went on to outline to Jeremiah His plans for the nation, namely:

- Just as He had brought the calamity on the people (on account of their disobedience), He would have mercy on them and restore them as He had promised [v. 42];
- David would never lack a man to sit on the throne of the house of Israel. Therefore, Jerusalem would one day have a king who would be called, 'THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS' [Jer. 33: 14-17]
- God would multiply the descendants of David His servant "as the host of heavens cannot be numbered, nor the sand of the sea measured" [v. 22].

Knowing God's position on your situation enables you to process and cope with it. For example, when David brought his predicament before God, the Lord specifically told him, "Pursue (the Amalekites), for you shall surely overtake them and without fail recover all" [1 Sam. 30: 8]. Armed with such divine assurance, he wiped away his tears. You can do likewise!

b) *Put your faith to work*

Jeremiah did not wait for God's explanation before he obeyed and bought a piece of land in a desolate and abandoned country. More than that, he began to praise God even before the fulfillment of His promises. He prayed and praised, saying, "Ah, Lord God! Behold, You have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and outstretched arm. There is nothing too hard for You... You are great in counsel and mighty in work, for Your eyes are open to all the ways of the sons of men" [**Jer. 32: 17, 19**].

Like king Jehoshaphat who went to war against a multitude of nations with an army led by praise-singers [**2 Chron. 20: 21**], you should march forward with faith, singing, "Praise the Lord of hosts, for He is good, for His mercy endures forever" [**Jer. 33: 11**]. Speaking through the Psalmist, God says, "offer to God thanksgiving, and pay your vows to the Most High. Call upon Me *in the day of trouble, I will deliver you, and you shall glorify Me*" [**Ps. 50: 14-15**]. Take the case of the Shunammite woman who had shown kindness to the man of God, Elisha. When her only son died of sun stroke, she left him on the bed in the prophet's chamber in their house and went looking for him. When her husband asked her where she was going, all she told him was "it is well." It was only after she had come to the prophet and caught him by his feet that she revealed her son's situation [**2 Kgs 4: 18-37**]. When you walk by faith, only people of faith will understand you. The rest will laugh at you or backbite about you. They laughed at Noah as he carved the ark during the dry season. When the floods came, Noah laughed last! So, stand on the promises of God for your situation and walk by His light.

c) *Then wait for results*

God assured the exiles a return of blessings in the following forms:

- Emotional and spiritual healing
In the cities of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem that were currently desolate, there would once again be heard "the voice of joy and the voice of gladness" [**Jer. 33: 10, 11**]; the exiled king Zedekiah would see a peaceful end and the people's emancipation would be sealed [**Jer. 34: 1, 8**]. The Davidic dynasty would be restored and the Levites would return to service in God's temple [**Jer. 33: 14,-17**].
- Material recovery
The nation and its cities would be rebuilt and the shepherds would once again have flocks that could lie down in peace and prosperity [**Jer. 33: 12, 13**].

The word of God will not fail for those who are ready to wait. To wait means to continue to serve and worship God even when what you are expecting has not arrived. The waiter in a restaurant does not hurry the customers to finish their meals just because he is tired of waiting. Instead, he puts up an infectious smile even when he is dropping dead for tiredness! In like manner, the true waiter for God cannot tell Him how or when to fulfil His promises. The Psalmist says, “Wait on the Lord; be of good courage, and He shall strengthen your heart. Wait, I say, on the Lord!” [Ps. 27: 13].

3. Conclusion: Jehovah-Tsidkenu will pick up your pieces!

What is it that makes you so ill at ease? What is it that keeps you awake each night that you are trying to drown with drugs and drinks? Why are you getting more absent from work and when you are at work getting more absent-minded? Why are you looking dejected even when you are elegantly dressed? Why are you displacing by pumping energies into other areas of your life to the detriment of what you badly need or miss? The likelihood is that you are dealing with some disappointment, some failure, some set back. Your cookie has crumbled and you have hard times trying to pick up the pieces.

In today’s lesson, God is challenging you to come to Him because nothing is too hard for Him. For His chosen people in exile, He promised to cause to “grow up to David a branch of righteousness” who “shall execute judgment and righteousness in the earth.” His name is “THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS” or Jehovah-Tsidkenu [Jer. 33: 15-16]. He came in human form as Jesus the Christ and by His stripes, we have been healed.

So, what then is your problem? Who is better placed to pick up your pieces than Jesus, the Lord your Righteousness? He has asked all those who labour and are heavy-laden to come to Him and He will give them rest [Matt. 11: 28-31]. Open the door of your heart to Him and He will come and sup with you and you with Him [Rev. 3: 20]. All shall be well. All is already well!