

Life Lessons from the Psalms

Both Sides Now

What Is Your View of Life?

More than thirty years ago I was a first year pastor of a church that was very different from the one I thought it would be. Without knowing the position the congregation had long held, I started having our communion during the Sunday morning service. It had previous to me always taken place during the Sunday night services. However, because very few in the congregation actually went to the Sunday night service, I thought it would be better to have communion on Sunday mornings when far more attended. Not long after I made the change, the chairman of deacons resigned and stopped attending our worship services. This infuriated many in the church because I was violating an unwritten rule of the church without knowing it. The church did not want non-members of the church participating in the Lord's Supper with them and because there almost never was a non-church member at the Sunday night services, they held it then. I went to meet with the former chairman of deacons, and he admitted he was not attending worship services anywhere; he just listened to a tape of old gospel songs instead. I was shocked. How could someone chosen to be chairman of deacons have so little Christian maturity? My opinion of him was not helped by his stance on communion, but even if we agreed, I would have been appalled by his lackadaisical approach to church. I was quite judgmental of the former deacon and saw him as lacking substance to his faith and it was almost a relief to me that he never returned to our church services as long as I was the pastor. I saw nothing wrong in myself and everything wrong in this deacon. I forgot that I too was a sinner. Our big idea, one I can't say I have ever heard described from a pulpit are what I call the two sides of Christianity. Make sure to let both sides of the Christian faith define your life.

There is a most curious juxtaposition of psalms that stand side by side in the Bible. The first is Psalm 88. Let me share a small portion of it. **For my soul is full of trouble and my life draws near the grave. I am counted among those who go down to the pit; I am like a man without strength. I am set apart with the dead, like the slain who lie in the grave, whom you remember no more, who are cut off from your care. You have put me in the lowest pit, in the darkest depths. Your wrath lies heavily upon me; you have overwhelmed me with all your waves.** (Psalm 88: 3-7 NIV) The melancholy and despair of this Psalm is from beginning to end. Many associate this Psalm with Job or some similar poor soul suffering unfairly but it is nothing of the sort. It is the dirge of a life buried in sin. We have no such view of sin as the Scriptures do. To the Bible, sin is the purging of life, the corruption of rotting fruit or rotting flesh. Most and even many in the church either completely disregard the plague of sin or see it as just a misstep or minor mistake. The Bible and this Psalm provide a profound picture of it; insist that sin is the fundamental building block of all evil and the source material of every death. Sin cannot simply be waved off like a minor inconvenience. God, who is the creator of life, the One who sustains the heavens and the earth saw it as the great evil of the seen and unseen universe. Even what we call a small sin is a terrible destroyer of the human soul. Just consider what God did to eradicate Sin. His Son, Jesus Christ was tortured, mocked and crucified for one purpose only. He died to kill off our Sin. Keep in mind that Sin is not just a few misdemeanors in the court of eternity. Sin is the predisposition to reject God as Lord and be King of oneself. Sin is the alignment with Satan in the great rebellion against God and it cannot remain if we are to have life. Sin in every instance brings death which is why Psalm 88 is so dark.

Right after Psalm 88 is of course Psalm 89. Up until verse 38 it is something altogether different from Psalm 88 as a song. Psalm 89: 1-37 gives us the swelling joy of life without sin. It is a celebration of salvation and the future it holds for all who are born again. Listen to its shout of victory. **I will sing of the Lord's great love forever; with my mouth I will make your faithfulness known through all generations. I will declare that your love stands firm forever, that you established your faithfulness in heaven itself.** (Psalm 89: 1-2 NIV) Psalm 89 soars alongside Jesus' shout of victory on the cross. "It is finished." Psalm 89 is a lovely depiction of the eradication of Sin and the elimination of all rebellion in God's Kingdom. It ranks with the end of Revelation and 1 Corinthians 15 as a pillar of how it shall be in the end. Psalm 89 is a look forward for those in Christ, Psalm 88 a look back.

Jesus' beautiful parable of the prodigal son is sometimes treated as biographical material, a sort of eyewitness account of a particular family. It is precisely a story Jesus made up to help us see just how terrible sin is and wonderful the

forgiveness salvation brings. The prodigal or younger son represents one aspect of mistreatment of the Gospel, the older son a different form of it. There are two very real traps we can fall into when it comes to the matter of Sin. We can ignore or even deny the glory of being free of Sin or we can forget the damage it has caused us and our relationships. Let's look at the younger brother first. Why did the younger brother ask his father to give him his share of the inheritance before the Father died? It was for one purpose. The younger son wanted to fund his degradation, his infatuation with Sin. He went to a far off land so his father would not be privy to just how badly he was living, and he spent his wad on every form of evil he could uncover. It was a total degradation of the soul by Sin. Now before the younger son went off to the far country, he was already a sinner. He was dead in his sin just as much as if he never had gone off to the far country. What the younger son lost sight of and it was to his great harm is the beauty of salvation. He had no eye for the wonder of being saved, of gaining freedom from sin and how wonderful it is to have a Savior, illustrated by the good father. He had no eye for the Gospel, not a bit of interest in salvation. Sin was his dream life and many, most of the world falls into this same trap. They choose as Paul puts it perfectly "the ways of this world". **As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath.** (Ephesians 2: 1-3 NIV) Sin is often misunderstood in the Christian community. We tend to think of it as if it were the sorts of bad behavior we deem big or even really big. Sin is what all of us had as creatures of death, the rebellion against God that results in us doing what we want as if we are in charge of us. The younger son was like all of us at one time or even still. He had no interest in salvation or the outcome it brings, He was not interested in the message of Psalm 89.

The older son was just the opposite. His deep anger at the father for restoring the younger son through salvation was rooted in his unwillingness to remember his own Sin. The younger son would not look forward; the older son would not look back. He refused to remember just how bad his own Sin was, how destructive it was to himself and to others. He could not imagine his pride or self-righteousness or spiritual arrogance was of any cause for judgement or renunciation. If there is anything to learn from Psalm 88, it is that sin of any kind is a horrific evil that completely wrecks you, regardless of whether you think your own Sin is very bad or not. The older son refused to look back at His Sin and see it for what it was, deadly rebellion against God. There are two great evils you can commit. You can refuse to look forward, not value the greatness of salvation and the life it promises. The second great evil is to decide not to look back, to quit giving thought to just how terrible Sin has been in you and the horrific cost to God to bring you out of it. Looking back keeps you from becoming proud and judgmental and losing your way spiritually by not realizing just how desperately you yourself need your salvation. Looking forward keeps you from choosing to live your old life as if you are still made for Sin, made to live without God. You have a joyful future worth chasing with all you have.

The Apostle Paul perfectly describes the psychological approach to life that is healthiest and most beneficial to you. **Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.** (1 Timothy 1: 13-14 NIV) He never forgot how badly he lived and the impact of not having faith in Christ. But he also knew the amazing future He had because of the greatness and goodness of God living in Him. What turned the younger brother around? He remembered that he still had a father who loved him, who could give him a bright future if he was willing to cut his ties with the past. So he returned home, and he got a new life. If someone tells you not to live in the past they are wrong. You must live in the past if you are to appreciate who you are now and really value what is coming. It is a great protection for you spiritually to remember you once were a sinner and that sin is the most horrific force working in the world. In the same way, never lose sight of the glory God is making of your life and how the best is yet to come for you. Our big idea is to make sure to let both sides of the Christian faith define your life. You once were a sinner who was lost without a Savior. And if you are born again, Christ has transformed you into a child of God and soon you will be perfect in every way. Imagine an ugly warty frog who is turned into a prince. He forgets about that past and his vanity about being a handsome prince makes him a miserable human being. Or what if the toad never thinks it possible he could ever be a handsome prince and won't bother coming out from under his pile of leaves? What is better than having Christ as Savior? Of leaving your Sin behind and being born again in every way? Never forget the Sin that could have you by the throat or the Salvation Christ gives you that will always get better and more joyful!