

Unconditional Trust

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

Volume 20, #19 May 15, 2005GG

Although the fig tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines; the labour of the olive shall fail, and the fields shall yield no meat; the flock shall be cut off from the fold, and there shall be no herd in the stalls: Yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will joy in the God of my salvation. The LORD God is my strength, and he will make my feet like hinds' feet, and he will make me to walk upon mine high places. To the chief singer on my stringed instruments. Hab 3:17-19)

We might offer any number of conditional statements of trust in God from Scripture, but each of those passages likely deserves special consideration in its unique context. Although this passage does not mention the word "trust," the reality of its pristine truth anchors in the writer's deep trust in God. His joy in God is not contingent on banner crops, growing herds, or other external signs of prosperity. The crops can fail and the herds die, but this man pledges, nonetheless, that he will rejoice in God. Not only does he view his joy in God as unconditional, he also realizes that his ability to view life in this way comes itself from God. Apart from a divine empowerment, he could not embrace such a solid commitment to joy in God.

Over almost fifty years of ministry I have visited many sick people, some of whom were in the dark shadows of the valley of death. Some of them voiced fears and other concerns, but most of them spoke of their joy in God and of their forgiveness toward people who may have hurt them through their life. Interestingly, most of them also voiced sincere concern that people who had taken offense at their conduct over the years would be able to forgive them. I am convinced that, as we grow older, we will either become increasingly bitter and cynical, blaming others for all of our problems, or we will become increasingly mellow, forgiving and considerate of others. One attitude is Biblical, exemplified in our passage; the other attitude grows out of a me-first sinful disposition that reaps the bitter harvest of a lifelong sowing of bitter seeds.

The underlying concept of the health-and-wealth gospel heresy of our time is conditional trust. You only trust God because you believe that in trusting Him all your problems will disappear. It is a form of unsanctified bribery. Trust God enough, and He will liquidate your debts and put money in your bank account. The most carnal atheist might "trust" God if he thought this premise were true. We call these kinds of decisions "no-brainers." This error directly contradicts Scripture; it certainly isn't based on Scripture. For example, "But thou hast fully known my doctrine, manner of life, purpose, faith, longsuffering, charity, patience, Persecutions, afflictions, which came unto me at Antioch, at Iconium, at Lystra; what persecutions I endured: but out of *them* all the Lord delivered me. Yea, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution." (2Ti 3:10-12) If health, wealth, and a peculiar absence of difficulties are characteristic of true faith in God, Paul must have been a champion unbeliever! We should not overlook the closing thought from Paul that all who truly live a godly life in Christ shall (There is a unique certainty to the point!) suffer.

Translate the ideas of our passage from an ancient agricultural culture to our world, indeed, to your personal world. It might read something like this. "Although I lose my job due to no fault of my own, and the unemployment fund of the state runs out of money, the administrator of my retirement fund robs the fund and flees to a foreign country, and my health insurance policy is canceled a week before I must enter the hospital for major life-threatening surgery, I will rejoice in God." Can you honestly make such an unconditional statement of trust in God, much less joy in Him under such adversity? Given that ancient Jewish culture's intense dependence on agriculture, the contemporary statement is no exaggeration of the original confession from the prophet.

Not long ago I heard a message that interestingly complained that our American culture has all but lost the present tense. We recall events from the past with the memory of an elephant, typically bad things, and we use them to keep score and justify a rebellious and unforgiving spirit against all those folk whom we believe have wronged us over the years. When Peter questioned Jesus regarding the number of times he could forgive someone who wronged him, he imagined that he was stretching the limit by suggesting "...till seven times." (Mt 18:21) No doubt his feathers wilted when Jesus responded, "... seventy times," not seven. No thinking Bible student would dare suggest that Jesus expects us to keep count and forgive four hundred ninety times, and then on the next time to claim justification for not forgiving. Jesus constructively was teaching Peter to stop a habit that is ingrained in our fallen, sinful nature, keeping score of all the wrongs that we imagine that people commit against us. You only know you've been offended seven times if you are keeping score. Jesus' real lesson was to immediately stop keeping score and to follow His imperative, "Forgive, forgive, forgive, and forgive again." Stop living in the past and keeping score of all the wrongs, real or imagined, that you've suffered. Never attempt to justify the sinful attitude of "I'll forgive, but I won't forget." Don't you understand? Biblical forgiveness is forgetting. You can't forgive till you've forgotten!

If we avoid the trap of living in the past, we ignore the present and live in anticipation of the future when we are out of debt, when we will surely enjoy better health than now, when we can start enjoying our retirement, or so many other reasons to avoid really living in the present. A convicting lesson from Scripture surfaces in the Old Testament laws of manna. God gave over two and a half million people supernatural food and water every day except the Sabbath for forty years during their wilderness wanderings. What is the lesson for us? Every sliver of useful manna came "today." Yesterday's supply served yesterday's need, but was rotten the next morning. No matter how much a man gathered for tomorrow, it was spoiled the next morning. Here is the powerful point. The only manna available to us—the only blessings God sends our way—come today. There is no manna in our yesterdays, and no manna in our tomorrows—only in today. How would this truth change your present attitude and conduct toward life?

In addition to our discarding of the present tense in our lives I'd add our failure to trust God unconditionally. We claim to have inoculated ourselves against the health-and-wealth gospel's materialistic error, but it contains a highly infectious virus. If we base our trust of God, and our joy in Him, on external things, particularly material things, we show distinct signs of the virus. Few practical teachings in today's Christian culture are as contradictory to Scripture as the health-and-wealth teaching. It runs diametrically opposite to New Testament teaching. It succeeds because it appeals to the pride and vanity of our carnal minds. After all, says our carnal mind, "I deserve good things," or "God wants me to be healthy, wealthy, and wise," or "God wants me to be happy, and I need these things to be happy, so God wants them for me. If I trust Him enough, He'll provide them for me." The more mainstream version of this self-centered attitude appears in the idea that we are presently working for more stars in our heavenly crown, as if our present superiority over others will gain us a higher position in heaven, making present discipleship a search for selfish gain, not greater service and glory to God.

Those folks whom I visited on their death beds who voiced gracious forgiveness of others and a sincere desire that others would forgive them were growing into this delightful Biblical concept of unconditional trust and joy in God. Must we wait for that degree of spiritual maturity till we are on our death bed? Must we live our entire lives in self-absorbed spiritual adolescence? The very best time to grow into that mature and distinctly "other-centered" Christianity that trusts and celebrates God unconditionally is today in the prime of life and its activities. The prophet was not writing from the perspective of a retired farmer who no longer depended on the crops, the herds, and the vineyards for his livelihood. He was active in his life and dependent on these things for his support. Spiritual

maturity clearly convinced him that the greater support in life comes from God, not from crops, careers, and “things.”

Despite this passage not mentioning the word “trust,” why did I choose it for this chapter’s theme? It goes beyond the word to the concept. Only as we trust God will we ever achieve the contentment and joy described in the passage. The prophet wrote a message based on the fruits of unconditional trust. It wasn’t something that he urged people to do. Rather it was something that he realized in his own travels of faith.

When I was young in the faith, I recall a hymn that some folks sang occasionally. I can’t reconstruct the words, but I recall the leading words to the chorus, “And that’s enough for me.” Take a long hard look at your contentment quotient. Start working toward Habakkuk’s goal.

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