

Songs of the Spirit/Psalms for the Seasons of Life

Conversing (#7)

Psalm 86, 25.4ff

8.25.13

(A Prayer of David) Incline your ear, O LORD, and answer me, for I am poor and needy. ² Preserve my life, for I am godly; save your servant, who trusts in you-- you are my God. ³ Be gracious to me, O Lord, for to you do I cry all the day. ⁴ Gladden the soul of your servant, for to you, O Lord, do I lift up my soul. ⁵ For you, O Lord, are good and forgiving, abounding in steadfast love to all who call upon you. ⁶ Give ear, O LORD, to my prayer; listen to my plea for grace. ⁷ In the day of my trouble I call upon you, for you answer me. ⁸ There is none like you among the gods, O Lord, nor are there any works like yours. ⁹ All the nations you have made shall come and worship before you, O Lord, and shall glorify your name. ¹⁰ For you are great and do wondrous things; you alone are God. ¹¹ Teach me your way, O LORD, that I may walk in your truth; unite my heart to fear your name. ¹² I give thanks to you, O Lord my God, with my whole heart, and I will glorify your name forever. ¹³ For great is your steadfast love toward me; you have delivered my soul from the depths of Sheol. ¹⁴ O God, insolent men have risen up against me; a band of ruthless men seeks my life, and they do not set you before them. ¹⁵ But you, O Lord, are a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness. ¹⁶ Turn to me and be gracious to me; give your strength to your servant, and save the son of your maidservant. ¹⁷ Show me a sign of your favor, that those who hate me may see and be put to shame because you, LORD, have helped me and comforted me.

(Psalm 25) Make me to know your ways, O LORD; teach me your paths. ⁵ Lead me in your truth and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all the day long. ⁶ Remember your mercy, O LORD, and your steadfast love, for they have been from of old. ⁷ Remember not the sins of my youth or my transgressions; according to your steadfast love remember me, for the sake of your goodness, O LORD! ⁸ Good and upright is the LORD; therefore he instructs sinners in the way. ⁹ He leads the humble in what is right, and teaches the humble his way. ¹⁰ All the paths of the LORD are steadfast love and faithfulness, for those who keep his covenant and his testimonies. ¹¹ For your name's sake, O LORD, pardon my guilt, for it is great. ¹² Who is the man who fears the LORD? Him will he instruct in the way that he should choose. ¹³ His soul shall abide in well-being, and his offspring shall inherit the land. ¹⁴ The friendship of the LORD is for those who fear him, and he makes known to them his covenant. ¹⁵ My eyes are ever toward the LORD, for he will pluck my feet out of the net. ¹⁶ Turn to me and be gracious to me, for I am lonely and afflicted. ¹⁷ The troubles of my heart are enlarged; bring me out of my distresses. ¹⁸ Consider my affliction and my trouble, and forgive all my sins. ¹⁹ Consider how many are my foes, and with what violent hatred they hate me. ²⁰ Oh, guard my soul, and deliver me! Let me not be put to shame, for I take refuge in you. ²¹ May integrity and uprightness preserve me, for I wait for you. ²² Redeem Israel, O God, out of all his troubles.

We've been looking at *The Book of Psalms* and we've been seeing how God takes believers INTO this big collection of prayers and songs...brings us here to form us and to cultivate our character.

We come into the world not knowing how to speak and our parents teach us to speak. AND we come into the Kingdom of God the same way...our SOULS ARE SPEECHLESS and God takes us into the Psalms to teach us "soul-speak"... how to pray.

This sermon has to do with a motif/theme we find in many of the Psalms and it's hard to give it a single word. Positively speaking we could call it (as Howard Macy does) the practice of conversing with God (and I'll get *to what that means* in a few moments). Positively, the songwriters express a desire to be led and directed in their decisions. And negatively, this theme has to do with what the philosophers call "angst". It's a sense of dread or a kind undefined feeling that things are not well...and I don't know what to do about it. We've already looked at Psalms of Despairing...and there may be some overlap...in fact THERE'S A LOT OF OVERLAPPING in the Psalms...a lot of repeated words and themes. But THIS may be a lower-level than despair... a general sense of futility or listlessness or loneliness or *bewilderment*.

Have you ever felt that you're just not sure you are using your life in the right way? Or like you're waiting for something and then when it arrives... "nope, that wasn't it" ? School...lunch ... homework... and work...paycheck...tv...weekend...work... weekend ... vacation... work... retirement. Is this all there is? And we do some good things along the way... we may even meet God...and then... work... weekend ...work work ...work ...work ...weekend... work... vacation ... work... winter, spring, summer, fall... work... retirement... death. And...family and friends and all that... but is there ever a sense that you're on a merry-go-round and not really making any traction? Like you're waiting for something... but what? Waiting to die and go to heaven? That's what we want to think about today: 1) The nagging sense of loneliness or angst or whatever it's called 2) The Great Reply 3) Living With a Real Sense of Progress

There's a whole book of the Bible devoted to this theme *this feeling of low-level futility as things get done ONLY to get undone again*. The Book of Ecclesiastes is a long meditation on this very theme – the task that belongs to all human beings... we make the bed...it gets messed up...we make the bed... life under the sun...toiling away.

And IN this task...though we may have the company of family and friends... ultimately... we're on our own and will die on our own...AND THEN, asks the writer of Ecclesiastes THEN "who will get what we have worked for? Vanity of vanities...chasing the wind."

It reminds me of the tragic character from Greek mythology, King Sisyphus. He's a ruthless, violent manipulator and he's sentenced by the gods to roll a giant boulder up a steep hill and when it gets near the top of the hill he ALWAYS loses control and the boulder rolls back down again...and up the hill and down for all eternity.

Life can feel like that sometimes...does anything really get accomplished that doesn't eventually come undone... roll back down again? Is there a better way to spend my one individual life before it's too late? And some people... in our own day... feeling this low-level futility (not the deep despair we discussed a few weeks ago) but just a sense that there must be more...or MIGHT be more...looking for some direction, some progress, some growth, some change... some people reconnect with their High School sweetheart on Facebook™.

And if you feel this sense that this routine you have feels like Sisyphus...or feels like "vanity of vanities and a chasing after the wind"...IMAGINE if you worked in a sweatshop...or a rice paddy in SE Asia...for 12 hours a day...without any options FOR change? Or to be incarcerated...hospitalized? Is it possible for people with VERY regimented routines to feel... vital and fulfilled and DIRECTED?

We don't know what David was facing in these Psalms and there is always opposition for him (again, enemies are mentioned here) but he DOES feel the need for direction...The climax of the first song (86) is v. 11 "Teach me Your way, O LORD; I will walk in Your truth; unite my heart to fear Your name." It's a cry for direction and for a new INNER DISPOSITION that's not distracted but focused. "Gladden" my soul he writes in v. 4 as if the anxieties of life and a sense of confusion leave him feeling...down. "Incline your ear...and...Listen to my plea for grace" (vv. 1, 7) as if he really needs to know that life matters, that there is a God and that this God acknowledges us and hears us when we cry.

In the second reading (Ps. 25) he puts it again and again. He uses all these words, "Make me know...you're your ways...teach me...Lead me...instruct me (v.8)" And what may be the deepest cry of this Psalm in v. 16, "Turn to me and be gracious to me for I am lonely and afflicted. The troubles of my heart are enlarged." It's a sense of life's difficulties...pushing that boulder up the hill and NEEDING to be assured that it really does matter and that it's not futile. "Is anybody OUT there? LORD, are you listening to me?...Will you NOTICE me... DIRECT me...CONVERSE with me? Give me progress instead of futility...and the sense that I'm on a treadmill."

And to make things even MORE anxious is the writer's sense that NOT only are we living in a world that's NOT what it's supposed to be...a fallen world with enemies and a place where things come undone where boulders roll back down the hill and "thorns infest the ground"...BUT there's trouble INSIDE as well... David uses four different words in the 25th Psalm to think about his own "dis-ease" – in v. 7 "remember NOT the sins of my youth...my transgressions...(v. 11) my guilt". He sees himself as part of the problem. Things he has done, said and thought that oppose God...and requirements he has left undone. He's ONE source of his own angst.

And his heart is fragmented and not focused on God (86.11 – "unite my heart to fear your name") ... "I realize that I'm double minded, truly wanting to worship this ONE and only God who is different from all the idols...and unique...BUT ALSO thinking of him as a genie in a bottle whom I seek to control and manipulate the way all religions and forms of spirituality seek to

control the forces. In my heart there's a self-destructive traitor opposing the Kingdom of God...
 "Pardon my guilt *for it is great*".

And David is crying out, "Lord, answer me...hear me."

He needs a word...needs direction...a reply and leading from the only God who is NOT UNDER THE SUN...but above the sun...the only God who can help and the God whom DAVID HAS OFFENDED!

And the way God responds... is to display His own character to David...AND to everyone who yearns for this response and LISTENS. He steers David's thoughts to who David IS...and TO WHO HE IS. In 86.1-2 David is, "godly" ("preserve my life for I am godly") – i.e. *he's connected to God* and in covenant with Him. He's God's servant – ultimately, he isn't owned by his employer or anyone else. He belongs to God. And third, "your servant who trusts in you" – I trust You. You have opened my eyes to see Your trustworthiness. Any apparent absurdity I face *in a world where I make the bed and it gets unmade...* I mow the lawn and it grows back... I push the boulder and it rolls back down... ANY APPARENT futility I see "under the sun"...I TRUST TO BE A PART OF A LARGER PLAN...and I trust you. I'm not Sisyphus! I'm a truster!

But MORE important than who David is...IS WHO GOD is! Both these Psalms answer our sense of angst and loneliness and futility with a WORD from God about who this GOD IS. 86.5 "You, O Lord, are good and forgiving, abounding in steadfast love..."

That phrase "steadfast love" is the way this version translates the Hebrew word, "hesed". It's a word used throughout the OT but the book that uses it MOST often is The Psalms. It means God's unilateral commitment to His own agreement. It means God's loyalty to meet NOT only HIS SIDE of the contract but also OUR side of the contract as well. You'll find this word in both these Psalms repeatedly. You'll find it in the 136th Psalm in every verse! (26x!) The "steadfast love"... the lovingkindness... the covenant loyalty of the LORD...the hesed. It's the tangible difference between YHWH (the God of Israel) and all the other gods...it's the difference between karma and grace...between the God of the Bible and every other way of doing religion or spirituality.

And when David reflects on that...HE sees it as the great Response, it's God's reply to our daily sense that things SEEM like their coming undone and that our lives are a treadmill without progress.

At the end of Psalm 86, David says, in effect, "I know this is TRUE...I know who I am...I know Who YOU are... but...can I please get...some sort of... indicator in my daily life...something that says, "Futility under the sun is NOT the final word...86.17...SHOW ME A SIGN OF YOUR FAVOR..."

A sign! That's what I need! "Show me a sign for good". T.J., why didn't you talk about this at the start of the sermon?! That's exactly what I need – I need to get a check in the mail from an anonymous source...I need to see a miracle (just a small one!)...I need to get healed of this torn

rotator cuff...I need ...just ONE TIME...to hear a voice from God saying, 'Go here or there'... 'take this job or that' ...or just 'I love you'...

But see we have the sign...and there can NEVER be another like or another as good as it – THE SIGN of God's favor (His hesed, His grace) the sign IS THE CROSS OF Jesus Christ and the Empty Tomb. The final sign has been given, the final word of grace and love and purpose to rescue us from our loneliness and our angst and futility. "I bring life OUT of death" says God in the Cross and Resurrection. The ultimate loneliness – has been endured – My Beloved Son alone in that garden when David's sin was being charged to Him...when my sin was charged to Him.

Imagine Jesus Christ praying that 86th Psalm for you and for me...*Listen: "For great is your steadfast love (hesed) toward me; you (Father) have delivered my soul from the depths of Sheol (from the tomb!)" (86.13)*

The empty tomb is the WORD I need, the sign that my daily routine is NOT Sisyphus... it's not a treadmill and God will bring good from it...That's what the God of grace does...The cross and resurrection is the ultimate proof and sign that I need.

Now how would this truth and these Psalms help us in our daily live to counteract angst and loneliness and equip us With a Real Sense of Progress?

1. We should look to be led by God on a daily basis. It's not that we need a new word...or a new sign, but that the Cross and Resurrection need to become newly VIVID each and every day. We do pray with the Apostles and with David, "Teach me, lead me, instruct me, unite my heart around this Good News, this ultimate sign."

How does the hesed of God, His grace toward me in Jesus Christ...how does that change the way I treat my kids or wife...my co-workers...a waiter/store clerk? Seeing myself as a messed-up person, living in a messed up world but also a LOVED PERSON whom God has noticed and redeemed and cherishes – how does that instruct me to use my daily routine?

25.8 says, "He instructs sinners in the way. He leads the humble in what is right and teaches the humble his way". The word "instructs" is actually "shoots" like an arrow. And in the Gospel we are looking to live in line (like an arrow) with this great reality. We are seeking to be shown by the Holy Spirit how to unite my heart around this big idea so that it changes the way I spend money...the way I may go to Haiti on a mission trip...the way I treat weak or really messed up people...the way I approach making the bed or driving the kids around or filing a quarterly report. That's what we're praying, as Christians every day, "Show me...instruct me...to be humble and believing because of Jesus Christ and let that explode the futility myth."

2. The real goal toward which we press and toward which we DO actually make progress is to know God and to know ourselves. 25.14 says, "The friendship of the LORD is for those who fear

him” It’s actually the word for secret; God tells secrets to those who walk with Him, He confides, He befriends” those who live in His presence and before His face. So, the guy in the rice paddy or in prison or who has a really regimented daily routine (at a factory or in a cubicle) can still know God as he/she works every day. The job may seem like a dead-end but what God is doing IN and THROUGH us is real. It’s our REAL task to invite Him in...it’s His garden that we tend and THROUGH Jesus Christ (the Better Adam) we’re walking with God again in that Garden.

3. Use these Psalms : take the class on Sundays or midweek as a way to keep your use of the Psalms fresh.

4. The LORD instructs the humble. This means that if you are a good person, standing on your own two feet and wanting what you deserve from God... you have not even begun to know Him.

If however, you see yourself as David did...a person whose heart/motives are messed up...who breaks God’s commands and YOUR’RE grieved about that... if you’re needy and you humble yourself daily and receive the grace God loves to give... He will lead you...and teach and instruct you...and change you. There will be real progress...slow but real.