

God's Great Ballad | The Flow of the Psalms

The Doing

Psalm 108 and 127 (Consummation)

8.9.20

Psalm 108 A Song, a Psalm of David. My heart is steadfast, O God; I will sing, I will sing praises, even with my soul. ² Awake, harp and lyre; I will awaken the dawn! ³ I will give thanks to You, O LORD, among the peoples, And I will sing praises to You among the nations. ⁴ For Your lovingkindness is great above the heavens, And Your truth *reaches* to the skies. ⁵ Be exalted, O God, above the heavens, And Your glory above all the earth. ⁶ That Your beloved may be delivered, Save with Your right hand, and answer me! ⁷ God has spoken in His holiness: "I will exult, I will portion out Shechem and measure out the valley of Succoth. ⁸ "Gilead is Mine, Manasseh is Mine; Ephraim also is the helmet of My head; Judah is My scepter. ⁹ "Moab is My washbowl; Over Edom I shall throw My shoe; Over Philistia I will shout aloud." ¹⁰ Who will bring me into the besieged city? Who will lead me to Edom? ¹¹ Have not You Yourself, O God, rejected us? And will You not go forth with our armies, O God? ¹² Oh give us help against the adversary, for deliverance by man is in vain. ¹³ Through God we will do valiantly, and it is He who shall tread down our adversaries.

Psalm 127 A Song of Ascents, of Solomon. Unless the LORD builds the house, they labor in vain who build it; Unless the LORD guards the city, the watchman keeps awake in vain. ² It is vain for you to rise up early, to retire late, to eat the bread of painful labors; For He gives to His beloved *even in his sleep*. ³ Behold, children are a gift of the LORD, the fruit of the womb is a reward. ⁴ Like arrows in the hand of a warrior, so are the children of one's youth. ⁵ How blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them; They will not be ashamed When they speak with their enemies in the gate.

This is the last sermon in this series. We've come to the final section in the longest book of the Bible. This is Book Five of the Psalms. This last division celebrates the CONSUMMATION of God's mission to planet earth.

This is the Book of Praises; it ends with the "Hallelujah Psalms" 146--150. They all start and finish with "Hallelujah" ("Praise YHWH"). This final book is soaked in a sense of rest... that God's mission will not fail and it ends with these outbursts of joy! As the miniature Bible the Psalms end like Revelation (19.1-6) ends "Hallelujah"!

Today, we have a double mash-up. Psalm 108 is mashed-up with Psalm 127 and THEN we learn that Psalm 108 is actually a fusion of two Psalms from Book Four (I'll explain that in a minute). Both 108 & 127 make the same point... in some ways it's THE MAIN POINT of the whole Bible – that NO ONE and NO THING is completely trustworthy but God Himself.

Today, we want to consider the idea of DOING the spiritual life; the idea of spiritual productivity, of producing results or progress or fruit. In whatever field or sphere where God has called you, how do you DO what He wants you to DO. What's important to know/remember in the DOING of the spiritual life?

You might think, "Well, that's simple enough – umm, follow Nike and 'JUST DO IT!'" But it turns out it's not THAT simple... It's possible that our doing is what the Bible calls, "dead works" (Heb 6.1, 9.14) DOING spiritual and moral deeds but somehow, they're only a shell and hollow... they appear to be the right things but they're empty... and you may not even know it.

There's an old hymn that counsels, "Cast your deadly DOING down..." So let's ask these Psalms how to go about that: 1) Deadly Doing 2) Mash-up Mystery and 3) How True Spirituality is Like _(blank)_ (I'll fill in the _(blank)_ when we get there).

The Book of Hebrews uses this phrase twice, "dead works" (deadly doing). The standard spiritual/religious life tries to do what God commands so that He will leave us alone OR that He will have to bless us.

The secular life is lived without deliberate reference to God but the religious/spiritual life is most often lived acknowledging God...perhaps even seeking to please God... by doing (commands/prohibitions).

We sometimes use the word, "works" or good deeds and in some circles that has a bad connotation but it shouldn't. The Bible sees that True Spirituality DOES good works (a theme in Titus 1.16; 2.7, 2.14; 3.8, 3.14) so there's nothing bad about doing works. There's nothing bad with going to work... doing works at work... Whether you work at home or in a different place, probably the main outlet or arena where you will do good works is AT work (you spend a lot of your life there).

The problem is that IN or work and our other callings like relationships and family and neighborhoods – when our works (at work or in our callings) become hollow/empty/dead.

One sign of that might be called – "over-work." When we're not working to live but LIVING TO WORK. We begin to give ourselves to work so that work becomes our life – our source of identity and value and life's-purpose is sort of swallowed up by good works AT WORK.

And, as we've mentioned a lot lately, work (along with many other pursuits in our secularized age) work very easily take on a religious quality. Work comes to define you. You fall into it. It's how you know you matter... Whether it's mothering or doctoring or pastoring or social-working or military service; "work is my life, it's who I AM – what I DO is who I AM!"

I read a memoir and the writer told how she hosted her own daughter's wedding with the help of a friend. The day after the wedding the two friends sort of basked in the afterglow. They laughed and celebrated and cherished the moments. Then at some point the friend said something like, "Ugh! Bummer we ran out of cake." And the mother of the bride felt like her heart stopped (couldn't think of anything else for days) – she realized that her LIFE was her hosting.

The other pitfall is what we might call passivism (not pacifism – like opposition to war). This is like what Paul addressed in the Thessalonians – "For we hear that some among you are leading an undisciplined life, doing no work at all, just acting like busybodies". (2Th 3.11)

And they sort of excused their laziness by calling it "faith" (which if it were real faith – the kind that receives grace, that'd be good!) but their "faith" didn't ever lead to love. It was just a religious wrapper over an empty form of laziness. And laziness isn't good for us...because work is actually a gift from God (even after the fall/curse). Paul wasn't just whining; he was concerned for their spiritual well-being.

So these are maybe a simplified way to look at how our WORK and our works can become dead-works – we look to our efforts to define us (be the source of life) OR what we call faith is really only a copout.

Now, to the Mash-up Mystery (2nd point): Psalm 108 is actually Psalm 57 and Psalm 60 combined (mashed up). That's a little unexpected...

But it turns out that the editors left out the first part of each of those Psalms and THAT'S WHERE the really painful, difficult stuff was. In other words: where David was hiding in a cave and surrounded by men who wanted to kill him ("lions and dragons") and where (in Ps 60) he complained about being defeated and abandoned by God – here (108) he leaves all that OUT and he skims the cream of the top. He (or the editor) reiterates only the sweet part of those earlier psalms where God comes to the rescue (last week: the God who loves to rescue – eager to rescue).

The main point of the new mash-up is found in v. 12 – it's as if (in this Book of Consummation) the writer is saying, "LORD, we're being so shaped by Your hosed (4) for so many generations we will eventually become convinced – 'salvation by man is vain/empty'".

It's like, "Lord, we've seen that we cannot save ourselves... we cannot look to Egypt or to our great chariots and armies and horses to save us – we've stubbornly trusted those things – but in the end (the consummation of Your mission) we'll finally see how dumb that is – people can't save us (not even ourselves, especially NOT ourselves!) Salvation from people is vain.

God is saying, “Great! In the end, you’ll celebrate that the Land you live on – the Land you call ‘our land’ – you’ll see that it’s actually MINE.”

See the repetition of that idea – v 8 Gilead is Mine, Manasseh is Mine... Judah is Mine...” God is saying, “Everything you enjoy is My gift to you – because to be in My Kingdom is a matter of grace – NOT deserving. I LOVE to give to you and for you to receive My gift through trusting Me – faith! I want you to see; (v. 6) you are My beloved.”

And that word connects us to our second, very short Psalm. The word “beloved” is also found in 127.2, “YHWH gives to His beloved even in his sleep” – The name God gave to Solomon (through the Prophet Nathan) is the name, “Beloved of YHWH” – yedid-yah – (Jedidiah) and that’s who wrote Psalm 127 (maybe he snuck his name into the Psalm – signature).

And this wisest man – the philosopher-king – Solomon or Jedidiah writes this wisdom poem that’s collected as the CENTRAL “psalm of ascents”. We think these 15 Psalms were sung by pilgrims as they ascended up to Jerusalem (where heaven met earth) during the yearly festivals. There were 15 steps up to the Temple and THIS is the middle Psalm and the pinnacle.

This Psalm says the same thing – “Unless the LORD builds the house, they labor in vain who build it” – again the main idea (maybe of the whole Bible).

Thomas Edison said there’s no substitute for hard work but Solomon is saying, “Even if you have hard work but YHWH isn’t the DOER... your work won’t really amount to anything...it’ll be vain (empty and ultimately insignificant)”.

Unless the LORD builds the city (at the start) and keep the city (ongoing) – to work without deliberate reliance on the LORD of the Covenant – the God of grace/hesed is empty... dead works. To trust in man is vain (108.12) and to trust in your ability to “get up early and get it done” to burn the midnight oil without depending on Him is vain.

It’s NOT that non-believers can’t build or be protectors but that in the end it won’t be significant UNLESS the LORD be the builder and YOU His instrument. To be a rickshaw driver in a slum in Kolkata in a faith relationship with the living God is better than being a billionaire venture-capitalist without Him. One’s life will have ultimate meaning and significance... the other won’t.

God is giver of gifts... and we are those called to live in trust... receiving His gifts (by faith) and then, in a sense, entering into His work with Him.

And then... the second stanza of Psalm 127 seems to take a hard turn. We’re building a house and guarding a city and next we’re having children: v. 3 “Behold, children are a gift of the LORD...”

Parents are on pilgrimage... ascending to Jerusalem and they come to this middle pinnacle and they look down at their kids and they reflect how they are NOW in the process of building a house, building the faith of their children. And then it dawns on them – “Remember how extremely difficult it was to MAKE this child? Boy we used shovels and heavy machinery and we carved his little head out of rock and we formed his little leg bones out of wood – we slaved day and night for years to form his little body...remember?”

No... all we did was... go into the bedroom and shut the door and...you know...turn off the lights. (He gives to His beloved even in his sleep.)

I mean...I’m not going to say we were completely uninvolved... but I can’t really call it work – it was more like a gift...a celebration of love and intimacy.

And from that act came these amazing little beings. And when you come of think of it – we’re not the maker of these little beings... and we’re really not their owners... The same way the Promised Land is a gift...these children really BELONG TO GOD.

We were there... in bed... but the child is from God and... and SO IT IS WITH GOOD WORKS... the start (the building) and the sustaining (the keeping) all initiate in the grace of God – He is author and Perfecter. We’re made right with God as a gift and we grow in holiness as a gift. Jesus Christ said, “Apart from ME you can do nothing.” (John 15.5) i.e. we can not do God’s work apart from abiding in the True Vine... ““Only one life ‘twill soon be past – only what’s done IN CHRIST will last.”

We show up... we’re not lazy...we’re a part of what God is doing – He allows us to participate and He rescues us from laziness because laziness is death. But the fruit is from Him. It’s NOT laziness and it’s NOT mere self-reliance/discipline... it’s organic.

Imagine... that little family making these yearly journeys UP to Jerusalem... Joseph and Mary take their Son to Jerusalem (Luke 2) ... They sing the “Songs of Ascents” and they come to this middle song; they get to v. 3 “Behold children are a gift from the LORD.”

And they realize that He is not only a gift... He’s the Child who is THĒ gift... like an arrow in the hand of a warrior...who will be the protector of His parents so that they... SO THAT WE...would not be ashamed when we confront the enemy in the gate. (5)

He, Jesus Christ, is the True Yedidiyah (the Beloved of the Father) and in Him – who lived, died and rose for us – in the Beloved (Eph 1.6) WE are beloved and God gives to His beloved, gives to us, even as we sleep and as we rest in Christ.

I said at the start... that the Christian Life is like (blank) ... Well, here it is: the Christian life is like procreation (I realize our congregation is of mixed age). The Spirit makes us alive... life from above (that which is born of the Spirit is spirit – John CH 3).

And Jesus Christ was asked, “How can we work the works of God? And He said, “This is the work of God that you believe in the One He sent...” (John 6.28-29)

It’s not feverish activity that does Kingdom work (like Martha in Luke 10) nor is it laziness – it’s active passivity. It’s deliberate resting and receiving. It’s being on pilgrimage every day and singing the songs of ascents... Coming to the True Temple to hear His voice in the Gospel... to know I’m loved and then to serve the world in the power/motives He conceives in us. Eugene Peterson wrote, “The most relevant contribution that Christians make at these points of impasse is the act of prayer – determined, repeated, leisurely meetings with the personal and living God. New life is conceived in these meetings.”

This week I received a real insight from an unlikely source, Howard Stern interviewed Jerry Seinfeld. They discussed *The Last Dance*, the recent documentary on Michael Jordon.

They debated how Jordon became THAT good and Howard claimed that Jordon will-powered his way to greatness and then Jerry offered this rebuttal:

“I’m going to adjust your perspective a little bit here. That was not will. What you were using, what Michael Jordan uses, what I use, it’s not will. It’s love. When you love something, it’s a bottomless pool of energy. That’s where the energy comes from, but you have to love it, sincerely—not because you’re going to make money from it or be famous or get whatever you want to get. When you do it because you love it, then you can find yourself moving up and getting really good at something you wanted to be good at. Will is like not eating dessert or something that is just forcing yourself. You can’t force yourself to do – to be – what you have made yourself into. You can love it. Love is endless. Will is finite.”

Jerry was so close... Love for your work is wonderful... But it can also enslave you.

But you see: there is something even deeper than OUR love for our work... it’s God’s LOVE FOR US IN Jesus Christ – and to see and feel your “belovedness” (to close the door and meet with God until you're convinced), is to tap into that only, truly infinite Pool...

It may not make your work GREAT (in the sight of people) but it will make your work KABOD (glorious and significant) in the sight of God and that’s what really matters!