

Counsel and confidence

I will bless the LORD, who hath given me counsel: my reins also instruct me in the night seasons. I have set the LORD always before me: because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved.
Psalm 16:7-8

Psalm 16 is a well-known messianic passage, as we know from its use in reference to the resurrection of Christ in the apostle Peter's first sermon at Pentecost (Acts 2:25-28). Yet, we must remember that in the many messianic psalms and other prophecies, there is also a primary application of these words to the writer. Here David blesses the LORD for the counsel that he has received from Him. In these verses he also elaborates on the means and the mechanism of this counsel. The evident means of receiving counsel from the LORD was by setting Him continually before him. This is a reminder of the command to Israel in Deuteronomy 6:6-9 to keep the words of the LORD continually within and among them and their families. Having the revealed word of God in our hearts and minds "always" provides the reminder that He is near, that is, "at my right hand," which gives confidence in Him through all the circumstances of life. Because of the awareness of His presence, we can say with David, "I shall not be moved." Thus, we hear the echo of the New Testament writers as they exhort us to be "stedfast, unmoveable..." (I Corinthians 15:58).

David describes the mechanism of the counsel received from the LORD as his reins that instruct him in the night seasons. As the reins are applied to the horse to constrain and direct it in the way that it should go, so David describes how the counsel of the LORD conforms his own inward constraints, to instruct him during his times of meditation. He speaks in other places of this meditation, even upon his bed (Psalm 63:6). This reminds us of the importance of those quiet times of meditation upon His word, to let His ways and principles so permeate our spirit that we will think and act in accordance with them. We also have the additional promise of His Spirit within to remind and witness to our spirit of His truth (John 14:26).

David goes on after this to describe the resulting gladness, glory, and rejoicing in his heart, and the accompanying hope of resurrection. While we understand the prophetic tone, as this points to Christ's resurrection, we can also with David rejoice in the hope of resurrection that all of His holy ones can enjoy. As the songwriter confidently penned, "When this poor, lisping, stammering tongue lies silent in the grave, then, in a nobler, sweeter song, I'll sing Thy power to save."

Proved and purposed

Thou hast proved mine heart; thou hast visited me in the night; thou hast tried me, and shalt find nothing; I am purposed that my mouth shall not transgress.

Psalms 17:3

At first read, David's claim here seems somewhat audacious, that God should find nothing evil as a result of testing his heart. Yet closer scrutiny and consideration of the context reveals a state of heart that we ought to emulate. In the context of the whole prayer uttered in this psalm, we see David being tested, not only by the Lord, but through the persecution from his enemy. In the context of the historical account, it is highly likely that the enemy here is the deranged king Saul. David would continue to wonder why the king that he had so faithfully served, and recognized as the Lord's anointed, would now be hunting him down to kill him. Such a state would drive a humble person in search of uprightness to beg God to search his heart and reveal whatever wickedness might be the source of the allowed persecution. As in Job's case, he would want to know what the problem was, that he might repent and be right with his Lord, and thus right with his fellow.

It seems from his claim right in the first verse that his prayer was not from feigned lips, along with our text and the remaining context, that at the point of writing David has allowed the candle of the Lord to search him and know his heart, and try him and know his thoughts, and is unconvinced of any remaining unconfessed sin. Not to the extent of claiming to be sinless, he could at this point honestly claim to be blameless – that nothing left had been revealed. It is from there that he could state his purpose to not transgress with his mouth. This is a noble standard to pursue, in light of the difficulty of taming the unruly evil of the tongue, according to many proverbial admonitions and the dissertation provided by James chapter three. Yet we see not a heart of pride in his goal, but a faithful dependence in the next verse (verse 4) upon the "word of Thy lips" to keep him from destructive paths. Should we not follow his example to pursue the highest goals, in utter dependence upon the cleansing power of God's convicting Spirit and the keeping power of His word?

Pastors Thoughts of the Week

Unabated Felicity

*Psalms 144:15: Happy is that people, that is in such a case:
yea, happy is that people, whose God is the LORD.*

Happiness is a fleeting sensation. So much of what makes us happy is determined by elements that are very mercurial, such as the weather or the mood of people that we are in social contact with or for that matter what the latest disturbing news headline might portend. The unpredictability of life in a cursed universe can produce a plethora of happiness-ending situations even for the most ebullient disposition. Unless we are possessed with a "hope that is steadfast and sure" our felicity is apt to be quenched with the first wave of bad news that inevitably reaches our ears before we swallow our first spoonful of breakfast.

The purveyors of bad news are ubiquitous and have employed the means of mass communication to make certain that no rational person should experience a "happy ever after" life. Consider the dour countenance of the national news talking heads that dish out their daily portion of gloom. One would have to agree with their morose assessments and dire prognostications if it weren't for the mitigating truth that the believer is well aware that our happiness is not bound to the events of a cursed world.

Our unabated happiness is predicated on the good news of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. As Jesus promised "your joy no man taketh from you". Our felicity is firmly fixed on a sure and certain hope in a coming redeemed world, vouchsafed to us by an immutable God. While the psychiatrists dispense their mood elevators, that only provide a temporary and artificial relief, the Lord of Glory has extended love, joy, and peace through the operation of His Holy Spirit. Happy, indeed, is that people whose God is the Lord!

Have a blessed week,

Pastor

Faith cometh by hearing: and hearing by the word of God Romans 10:17

Setting the Affections

*Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth.
– Colossians 3:2 –*

Affections are a deep sense of fondness. They are acquired or strengthened over a period of time and as the result of significant interaction on our part. For instance, parents' affections for their newborns are innate and God-given. But the longer that child lives, the deeper the parents' affections grow for him. There is a transparently direct relationship between time, attention, and the deepening of affection.

In our text, Paul exhorts us to set our affection on things above. The abrupt imperative is burgeoning with deep meaning. In our flesh, we all have the tendency to hold too tightly to this earthly existence. The present usually requires much of our attention, and we can easily succumb to the temptation to yield our affections here as well. But even the purest of terrestrial enjoyments cannot compare in importance or magnitude to our treasure above. By the indwelling Spirit of God, we possess the remarkable ability to direct our spiritual nature. On a daily basis, we must volitionally point our hearts heavenward, where we possess an inheritance that is incorruptible, undefiled, and fading not away. The more time we spend in God's word, amongst God's people, and in God's service, the more precious that inheritance becomes. And as the pristine glories of the world to come begin to garner more of our attention, our desires for things here and now begin to wane. We start to not merely recognize our eternal destiny, but actually embrace it. This creates an intense yearning for the coming realm. Soon, our temporal goals as well as the struggles that surround us – sickness, loss, distress, injustice, etc. – all begin to loosen their grasp upon our hearts. Our tears begin to taste more of longing than sorrow, and our fondest joys become quite other-worldly. By setting our affection on things above, we prove our Lord's words – "Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also."

Brothers and sisters, let us not mistake God's blessings here for the sum total of our inheritance. We can enjoy His goodness and His temporal gifts, certainly. But where is our treasure? This world is so very cursed, and life here is a vapor that appears for a little while, and then vanishes away. Christ purchased us for eternity. He has something so much better in store. Let us remember, He saves the best wine for last. May we wisely direct our hearts, using our time and attention to set our affection on things above, not on things on this earth.

-- D. Murcek

Behind and Before

Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended: but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before,

Philippians 3:13

The third chapter of Philippians gives a summary of the Apostle Paul's life before his conversion, and states the newfound purpose he had in Christ. After being obsessed with hatred for Christ and His followers, Paul was now refocused on knowing his Lord in a deeper and fuller way. This dynamic conversion would reverberate through the ages, testifying to the saving power of the resurrected Christ. It also set a pattern for us of a successful Christian life.

Forgetting the things of the past enables us to be unhindered while moving forward. If he had dwelt on it, Paul's past could have hindered him from progressing in his Christian walk. Had he continued reflecting on those days when he tried to destroy the Christian movement, Paul might have crippled himself with feelings of total unworthiness. He could have floundered for the remainder of his life instead of trusting the power of the riches of God's grace and bearing fruit for Christ. But Paul was able to move on from those things which only had worldly value, knowing that his education and prestigious position were not prerequisites that the Lord demanded. In his second epistle to Timothy, Paul reminds us that God *saves us and calls us with a heavenly calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace*. Paul's goal changed at his conversion; he now tried to build up that which he once tried to destroy. With energy and zeal, Paul now traveled the path the Lord set before him. True worship in spirit and truth would replace dead formal religion. Love for all was demonstrated as he brought the life-saving message to the Gentiles. Instead of teaching the traditions of men from his formal education, he now taught the welcome message of salvation by grace and not of works by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Paul became keenly aware of the reality of the wonders of eternal life. On the eve of his martyrdom, the apostle exclaimed that there was a crown of righteousness waiting on the other side for him.

We must also put the past behind us. God is able to break not only the chains of sin, but He also is able to liberate us from the haunting memories that can hinder us. Let us advance toward His kingdom keeping our focus firmly fixed on the Savior. ~J. Ekis

Following Hard

My soul followeth hard after thee: thy right hand upholdeth me.
– Psalm 63:8 –

Christendom has been infected in these last days with an antinomian view of the grace of God. Many claim to believe in Christ, but so many seem to be barely following him. There are Christ-professors everywhere, but humble and holy lives are few and far between. We must ever remind ourselves that a profession of faith is not a passport into the Kingdom. Many will say unto Him in that day, “Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? And in thy name done many wonderful works?”, only to hear Christ’s awful renunciation, “I never knew you.”

The true child of God is a hard-and-fast follower of the Lord Jesus Christ. This means that, just like the first twelve disciples, one hears the Master’s call – “Follow me” – and not only sets out, but also continues to ardently chase the Lord. This is not a momentary or one-time decision, but a series of daily ones. It is a life of continuous reflection and transformation.

Following hard after Him means to leave houses and lands and family and friends. It does not shrink at the refrain, “Though none go with me, still I will follow.” Following hard may mean to change or abandon everything from pastimes to occupations for moral reasons. It could require us to sever relationships of unequal yokes. It drives us to deny self and take up a cross, and to crucify the flesh daily thereon. While it does not entail being sinless, following hard after God does imply the striving for perfection, because our heavenly Father is perfect. Following hard means to never be satisfied with the here and now, and yet ironically to be content in whatsoever state we find ourselves. It means recognizing that we are currently in a hostile environment, and that the Kingdom is really our home. Following hard means that while we aim to be genuine, we embrace the fact that others may find us odd because our affections are other-worldly, and that it not concerning to us at all. Following hard means anything we “own” belongs to God, and whatever He wants us to do with it, we will see to it. Following hard is constantly and continuously trying to catch Jesus, that we may cast all our cares upon Him, knowing that He cares for us.

You see, true discipleship is the act of following hard after Christ. From Genesis to Revelation, the scriptures make it clear that if we are not following hard, it is likely that we are not following at all. Let us examine ourselves. What is the intensity of our chase of the Master? He is up there ahead – let us follow hard after Him.

-- D. Murcek

Gentleness unleashed

Behold my servant, whom I have chosen; my beloved, in whom my soul is well pleased: I will put my spirit upon him, and he shall shew judgment to the Gentiles. He shall not strive, nor cry; neither shall any man hear his voice in the streets. A bruised reed shall he not break, and smoking flax shall he not quench, till he send forth judgment unto victory.

Matthew 12:18-20

Matthew provides us with an inspired commentary on the identity of the servant prophesied in Isaiah 42. As Jesus has just charged a multitude of people whom He had healed not to make Him known, this messianic prophecy is cited as being fulfilled. Had normal men such power to heal, they would be lifting their voices high in the streets, grasping for fame. Yet Jesus came to serve, not to be famous, even though His service brought fame. Thus, He not only had power to heal, but He also had power to refuse any temptation to human ambition. On the heels of this is the account of His healing a demonized man from being blind and dumb. As the common crowd viewed all of these miracles, they could not help but ask the rhetorical question, "Is not this the son of David?" (This insinuation that He was Messiah is interesting also in light of the balance of Isaiah 42.) Upon hearing this, the Pharisees, who had begun to seek His destruction, attempted to correct the crowd by ascribing Jesus' power to "Beelzebub the prince of the devils." Again, a normal human reacting to such a degrading criticism would no doubt lash out loudly in selfish defense and similar ad hominem attacks. Yet Jesus, who "knew their thoughts," does no such thing, but instead approaches their claim with calm logic about its utter absurdity. While Jesus follows with strong language concerning the doctrine and actions of the Pharisees, He does so always in truth and control, continuing to fulfill the prophecy of Isaiah concerning His gentleness and meekness. By seeking and stating truth, instead of His own self-defense, He proved to all His unmatched strength of character. The truth that He shared would benefit the common crowd that heard it with faith-building facts, and could also benefit His false accusers if they would but hear and repent.

How well do we follow this example of the Gentle Shepherd? When others would attack, degrade, or say any manner against us falsely, do we respond with gentle truth for the benefit of our accusers, as did our Master? While some would label gentleness or meekness as weakness, we see by His example that this is not the case. The fruit of the Spirit includes longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, and temperance (Galatians 5:22-23), all of which He demonstrated in His controlled and logical rebuke to these enemies. Let this mind be in us as well, as we follow His example.

Pastors Thoughts of the Week

Be Careful What You Wish For!

*Psalms 106:15: And he gave them their request;
but sent leanness into their soul.*

In the Greek fable, King Midas pined for the power to convert whatsoever he touched to gold. Dionysus granted the power but the expected satisfaction was never realized for Midas could not eat, drink, lay his head down, or embrace his children without the cursed touch destroying the simple pleasures of life.

The children of Israel lusted for meat. The heavenly supplied manna no longer satisfied their palate and they longed for the diet of the Egyptians. Their complaint reached the ear of the Almighty and He gave them what they wished for but before too long the petitioned quail became loathsome to them as well.

How many times believers fall into this syndrome. We wish for temporal success and prosperity, some "must have" desire only to find it bringing leanness to the soul. "Oh Lord" we pray, "this job, this man, this woman, this house, this car, this inheritance, this ability, this degree, this gift, this thing that I must have to satisfy my desire". In 1 Samuel 8 the elders of Israel longed for a king: "make us a king to judge us like all the nations." The prophet warned them that this request would bring leanness to their soul: "ye shall cry out in that day because of your king which ye shall have chosen you; and the LORD will not hear you in that day." In the fatuous desire to emulate their heathen neighbors they forfeited the unique favor of Divine superintendence.

In the gratification of their desires, in great temporal success and prosperity, individuals, churches, nations, often forget their dependence on God; lose their sense of the value of spiritual privileges and blessings: are satisfied with their condition; become self-confident and proud, and forfeit the favor of God.

May the Lord make us blissfully satisfied with His daily provision being assured that He will provide what is most needful for our spiritual maturity.

Have a blessed week,

Pastor

Faith cometh by hearing: and hearing by the word of God Romans 10:17

Where Dweldest Thou?

...They say unto him, Rabbi, (which is to say, being interpreted, Master,) where dwellest thou? He saith unto them, Come and see....

– John 8:38-39 –

These two disciples of John the Baptist were about to experience a radical change. They had been with John, whose austerity was driven by his mission of preaching the baptism of repentance. Their dwelling had likely been with him in the wilderness, where John no doubt instructed them daily as to the import and profundity of the soon coming Lamb of God. When they leave John to follow Christ, their question is a natural and, if you will, a material one, “Where dwellest thou?” Was Jesus a wilderness-dweller, too? But their inquiry resonates on a spiritual frequency, as does Jesus’ inviting answer, “Come and see...”

Where does Jesus dwell? He that dwelleth in the secret place of the Most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty. Jesus is the perfect Son of Man. He owns that secret place by faith, and anyone who dares to follow Him will know the same covert of the Father’s protective custody. It is here, as we stay with Him, where the soul may finally dwell at ease. But Jesus is not merely perfect Man, but God Himself. He is the same God who dwelleth between the Cherubims at the Mercy Seat, the Lord of Hosts whose dwelling is Mount Zion. Christ is the High and lofty One who inhabits eternity, dwelling in a high and holy place with him that is of a contrite and humble spirit. Yes, Jesus is Jehovah Himself, who is the dwelling place of Israel to all generations, and who chose to be made flesh and dwell among us, so that we could behold His glory, as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth. After His resurrection and ascension, where He sat down on the right hand of God, He sent His Spirit, even the Spirit of Truth, not just to dwell with us, but in us, that He may guide us into all truth. And the day is soon coming when the New Jerusalem will descend from heaven as a bride adorned for her husband, where the tabernacle of God is with us, and He will dwell with us – visibly and tangibly – and we shall be His people, and He will be with us and be our God.

Because of His invitation to come and see, all of those who follow Him can rest assured that goodness and mercy shall follow us all the days of our lives, and we will dwell in the house of the Lord, with Him, forever.

-- D. Murcek

A Second Call

And many charged him that he should hold his peace: but he cried the more a great deal, Thou son of David, have mercy on me.

Mark 10:48

It is apparent throughout the scriptures that God answers prayer. We are admonished to call upon Him, and He will answer us. Having faith in God's power to deliver, we should cast all our cares on Him. We see examples such as Moses, Elijah, David, Hannah, and a host of others whose prayers were answered when they called upon God. Jesus taught that if we believe and pray for God's will, our request would be granted. Yet there are times when the Lord does not respond immediately, but first tests our perseverance before He answers.

In today's text we find blind Bartimaeus sitting beside the highway begging. When he heard the commotion of the multitude traveling with Jesus, he began to cry out for mercy. Yet the Lord who knows and sees all continues to walk past the poor blind beggar. Did He not hear Bartimaeus? Did He not see the blind beggar on the roadside? There is nothing that passes the watchful eyes and the sensitive ears of our Savior, yet He does not heed his cry. But when the blind man calls out more urgently the second time, Jesus stands still and calls for Bartimaeus to be brought to Him. The diligent second call made the difference!

The scriptures set down some guidelines to prayer. It should be rooted in faith and also have an element of fervency. Asked in accordance with God's will, our prayers become our heavenly lifeline. We also see that the Lord does not always answer immediately. Sometimes He intentionally waits for some reason, perhaps to develop our patience, and to test the purity of our faith. The meaning of a well-known verse encourages us to ask and keep asking, to seek and keep seeking, and to knock and keep knocking till we hear from heaven. Just like the importunate friend in Luke 11, we should continue asking until our request is granted.

As we grow in our Christian walk, we will gain more and more knowledge of God's ways. There will still be elements of mystery, because His ways are higher than ours. Knowing that our prayers are heard is a great source of comfort, but there will be times when we will need to call out with fervency a second time.

J. Ekis

Bringing in Something Better

For the law made nothing perfect, but the bringing in of a better hope did; by the which we draw nigh unto God.

Hebrews 7:19

In the early days after being divinely delivered from the oppression of Egypt, the Lord gave Moses the commandments. By means of moral and ceremonial law, God's people now had structure to govern their lives, and a means of atoning (in type) for their sins. It brought structure and a form of unity to their culture but was still greatly lacking in its ability to develop a close relationship with God. Man's inability to perform the whole law was demonstrated throughout the Old Testament. Some of the great personalities of the Old Testament glaringly showed their failure at law keeping. Through repentance and offering a sacrifice for their sins, they still were personally prevented from entering into the holy place.

The advent of the Lord Jesus brought a better hope. The bringing of this better hope was announced by John the Baptist by saying *"Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world"*. It was not possible that all the previous inferior sacrifices could wash away sin and provide an entrance into God's presence. It was Jesus the Christ alone that brought a hope that would allow sinful people to find forgiveness through the shedding of His precious blood, and obtain a close relationship with the Heavenly Father. How much of a better hope we have, when we have the confidence that our home in heaven is secure. Instead of travelling through life with nagging doubts concerning our eternal destiny, we can have a certitude that relieves fears or worries about the future beyond our earthly existence.

After our conversion there can be a tendency of resorting to fleshly works and offerings as a means of drawing closer to God. Just as the Old Testament offerings of goats and bulls could not cleanse from sin; our own works also lack the efficacy to allow a close relationship with God. We must always remember our Lord Jesus brought a better hope that draws us nigh to God. May we live and thrive in that hope today!

J. Ekis

Troubles

*This poor man cried, and the LORD heard him, and saved him out of all his troubles.
Psalm 34:6*

The theme of this verse is repeated in various forms in this very familiar and often-quoted psalm. While verse 6 is a singular and personal application of the Lord's deliverance, it is echoed in plural for general application in verse 17: "The righteous cry, and the LORD heareth, and delivereth them out of all their troubles." We are thankful for these reminders of the Lord's delivering power, displayed toward them that seek Him, fear Him, trust Him, and, as a result of His work in them, love and do right. (We see the opposite also pronounced upon them that seek evil and hate righteousness.) However, it is notable what these verses do not say. They don't promise the absence of troubles for the righteous. Reference to salvation and deliverance "out of" troubles implies that the troubles do come. This is indicated in verse 19: "Many are the afflictions of the righteous: but the LORD delivereth him out of them all." In this world, troubles and afflictions are part of natural existence, and verse 19 seems to indicate that the righteous should expect more. Eliphaz expresses to Job the common nature of trouble, "man is born unto trouble, as the sparks fly upward" (Job 5:7). Jesus told His disciples just before His arrest, "In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).

While we cannot expect to avoid troubles and afflictions, we can rest in these multiple observations and implied promises that the Lord hears when we cry unto Him in the midst of the storm. We can trust that He knows the way that we take and will bring us out at His set time. In this we must remember that His perspective is eternal, and as His people we also must consider that the deliverance we seek may be realized in the temporal, but is certainly in the eternal realm. So the apostle proclaims that "in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him that loved us" (Romans 8:37). It is this trust that redeems from desolation, and causes us to bless and magnify the Lord at all times.

Pastors Thoughts of the Week

Content To Trust

Job 38:2-4: Who is this that darkeneth counsel by words without knowledge? Gird up now thy loins like a man; for I will demand of thee, and answer thou me. Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth? declare, if thou hast understanding.

The sin of presumption can adopt many forms. Man's finite mind sometimes mistakenly thinks it has a right to question the Almighty. God has equipped us all with the capacity of reason which, at least at times, demands explanations from the Creator. Inquisition after all is what brings a man to belief. But there are boundaries which must never be violated. "Hitherto shalt thou come, but no further" says the Lord to the proud waves and likewise to the proud insinuations of man. In our sedulous pursuit of truth we must never lose sight of the infinite chasm that separates the Divine from the profane-the Creator from the created. As sanctified as one may be we are always reminded that man in his best state is altogether vanity. And that vanity is always seeking opportunity to ventilate.

God's permission of suffering has always been a source of consternation for the skeptic. Men surmise that God owes them an explanation. To this point in the drama of Job, God has been silent. Job laments "Oh that I knew where I might find him!". In our reference above after Job's faith has been sorely tried, the Lord finds him. In Sir Robert Anderson's seminal work *The Silence of God*, we read these salient thoughts:

"No one may limit what God will do in response to individual faith. But we may confidently assert that, in view of His supreme revelation in Christ, God will yield nothing to the petulant demands of unbelief. And that revelation supplies the key to the dual mystery of a silent heaven and the trials of the life of faith on earth."

Life in a cursed world is a tenuous journey filled with dangers, toils and strife. One must not expect to "be carried to the skies on flowery beds of ease". We dare not accuse our gracious Maker of caprice in His permission of our afflictions but rather rejoice that the day of redemption is soon at hand. God forbid that His children darkeneth counsel with words without knowledge. Let us be content to trust the infinite mind of God and find our place at His feet declaring He doeth all things well.

Have a blessed week,

Pastor

Faith cometh by hearing: and hearing by the word of God Romans 10:17

From Shadows to Light

The people which sat in darkness saw great light; and to them which sat in the region and shadow of death light is sprung up.

– Matthew 4:16 –

Those who profess to be atheists demand proof of the existence of God. The shocking hubris to articulate a requirement from the Almighty author of the universe aside, such demands are both humorous and sad because of the abundance of evidence that God has left for man to find Him. The ancients obviously understood they were not alone. They searched for God, but because of their vain imaginations, they turned the truth of God into a lie and worshipped and served the creature instead of the Creator. As mankind has iteratively and increasingly embraced his sinful inclinations over the course of millennia, he has placed himself at the pinnacle of all things, enthroning reason as his god and empowering “science” (falsely so called) as its prophet. Because mankind has now excluded God from the outset of any inquiry, the evidence that God has woven into every fabric of His creation serves as a condemnation to the proud intellect of willfully ignorant minds.

But there is one evidence that God has given that is incontrovertible. This confirmation of Himself is found in His living epistles, known and read of all men. It is not merely a verification that God is, but that He is good and merciful and wonderful and loving and kind. Yes, the converted soul is the greatest affirmation of the existence and character of God. No matter what sophisticated arguments or devilish assaults are brought against those who have been purchased by the blood of Calvary’s Lamb and live in the power of His resurrection, there is nothing that can disarticulate the fact that those who once sat in darkness now live in great light. We who have been redeemed possess within our hearts the most authentic evidence of the invisible God. We know that we have been changed in a way that cannot be accredited to any inherent means. There was a radically supernatural event that took place within our souls, transforming us from natural brute beasts into sons and daughters of the living God. Our self-centered universe was decimated by the earthquake of the love that Christ poured out at Calvary, and once embraced, we have never been the same. When the light dawned, the shadows fled. Our own existence is no longer an enigma. Life, though still at times difficult, is now upwardly positive, because God not only exists, but He lives within us, loves us, and continues to change us from glory to glory.

Dear reader, do you recall that former life in the shadows? And are you not eternally grateful for the light? Let us live today in the power of that redemption luminescence, that all who encounter us may see clearly that light has sprung up in the valley of the shadow of death.

-- D. Murcek

Take It With You

Therefore, they that were scattered abroad went every where preaching the word.

Acts 8:4

In a week's time, we find ourselves in a variety of places. Whether it is school, work, church, shopping, or some special activity, each requires us to bring necessary items. Books, lunch, tools, shopping list, and the ever-present cell phone are just a few of those things. As Christians, the most important thing that we bring with us is the lifesaving message of our faith. Each and every destination provides an opportunity to share the Word.

In today's text, the infant Christian church was experiencing a storm of persecution. The infamous zealot Saul of Tarsus was wreaking havoc in the early church, entering into every house, hailing men and women, and committing them to prison, causing many Christians to scatter in order to escape the coming persecution. This obviously required leaving things behind, *but their faith went with them*. Though it was certainly something they would never have chosen, persecution provided those early Christians with an opportunity to spread the Word. What man meant for evil would be used of the Lord for spreading the good news of salvation. The Bible records the deeds of Paul, but there were countless unnamed others who moved about spreading the seed of the gospel. The reverberations of that scattering impacts us today.

The lesson of this verse applies to us today. We may not be scattered because of persecution, but almost every day we do move about in our world. Sometimes in Christian circles we have designated times to evangelize yet fail to see the opportunities that our daily routine provides. A friendly exchange with a person passing by on a walk in the park can lead to a conversation for sharing our faith in Christ. Having a pleasant countenance and expressing thanks to a store clerk, even and especially a grumpy one, may provide an opportunity to share the Word. Doing a good deed for someone in need can help us to earn their trust as well as a listening ear and an open heart for our message of eternal life. Having the Holy Spirit within and the greatest message on our lips, we are carrying with us the Hope of the world. So, while traveling about through life, let us remember the treasure we take with us.

J. Ekis

One message

But the meek shall inherit the earth; and shall delight themselves in the abundance of peace.

Psalm 37:11

As we read this psalm that contrasts the wicked and the righteous, and instructs the righteous to be steadfast in faith, and not be troubled by apparent temporal success of the wicked, we come across this familiar axiom from the Lord. It is familiar to most of us because Jesus employs this truth among His declarations of blessing at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew chapter five. While Jesus brought abundant light on many new realms of truth in His teachings, further consideration and comparison should help us to understand that it was often not new truth, but deeper understanding and application of truth already revealed in the Old Testament scriptures. So when He declared that the meek are blessed, He also provided the basis from this statement in Psalm 37 that He quoted. This is consistent with His declaration that He came not to destroy the law, but to fulfill it. It is very important for us, therefore, to realize the unity of the message in the whole Bible, in both Old and New Testaments. The more we read and study both testaments, we will continually see the message from their one Author coming through in various passages. In many instances, Jesus' teachings concerning the law, as seen in the Sermon on the Mount, were for the correction of wrong understanding or application of the precepts and principles of the law. This, in fact, was key to infuriating the Pharisees and Sadducees because of their misapplications, as perceived spiritual leaders in Israel.

The application for us is to make sure that our Bible reading and study span the whole of scripture. By doing so, we allow these adumbrations of truth to build our faith, as they testify of the unity of God's message to our souls. Then, as we read either testament, His Spirit will bring to remembrance those things that He has revealed elsewhere, and solidify them in our hearts. We will read the Epistle to the Romans and hear the echoes of Isaiah's admonitions and prophecies. We will hear the voices of the prophets reverberate throughout the book of Revelation. And, of course, we will see the "rest of the story" unfold as we wade the enriching depths of the Epistle to the Hebrews. Let us launch out into the deep, and let down our nets for a draught.

Welcome search

The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it? I the LORD search the heart, I try the reins, even to give every man according to his ways, and according to the fruit of his doings.
Jeremiah 17:9-10

Early in his general epistle to the church, James warns about our tendency to forget what we have seen in the mirror of God's word regarding ourselves, and exhorts us instead to stoop down and carefully peer into the perfect law of liberty, considering what it reveals, that we might remember and continue in its truth (James 1:23-25). This admonition is appropriate for application to the text before us. Our human condition would readily dismiss the truth of the deceitfulness of our own hearts. The sinful nature with which we were born is normally all about justifying ourselves in thoughts and motives, actions and reactions, accusations and condemnations, judgments and misjudgments. As is often observed, we are more adept at identifying in others the faults that we are blind to find in ourselves (Romans 2:1).

It is good to observe not only the statement and question in verse nine, but especially the answer to the question that immediately follows in verse ten. Once we peer into this mirror and recognize ourselves in it, we are provided the remedy for self-deception – to beg the Lord who sees and knows our hearts to search and test. It is clear that His word will do this according to the promise of Hebrews 4:12-13: “For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discernor of the thoughts and intents of the heart. Neither is there any creature that is not manifest in his sight: but all things are naked and opened unto the eyes of him with whom we have to do.” He will also bring this truth to convict our hearts, for example, when it finds us condemning the actions of others that reflect our own faults. With Him as our judge only, we would have much to fear, but as our Savior also, we can realize that what He reveals is not only right, but for our good. Then we can confess with David, “O LORD, thou hast searched me, and known me,” then also pray with him, “Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts: And see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting” (Psalm 139:1, 23-24).

Pastors Thoughts of the Week

Too Smart For Your Own Good

*Ecclesiastes 7:16: neither make thyself over wise:
why shouldest thou destroy thyself?*

The Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries liberated the common man's conscience from the oppressive authority of the Catholic Church. For over a millenium the European population suffered under the capricious jurisdictions of papal oppression. Corruption in the priesthood, the building of great cathedrals on the backs of heavily taxed citizens, forced conversions under the Crusaders, the selling of indulgences, and other problematic practices were forced upon a largely illiterate population who did not have the ability to read the Bible for themselves—and certainly not in their own languages. Such problems created a climate in which many were happy to consider the claims of the Protestant Reformers and learn to read the Bible in their mother tongues.

As an outgrowth of this liberation, the Great Enlightenment was birthed. Having justifiably renounced superstitions, ritual, and obsequious submission to the clergy, many went a step too far in also abandoning the Word of God as the final arbiter of truth and only authority for moral ethics. Rather than exercising faith in the invisible God and His infallible word, men became subscribers to the fatuous notion of empirical reasoning. The enlightened mind would hail back to the greek philosopher Protagoras' assertion that "Man is the measure of all things". Empiricists demand physical proof(ie.what one can see, hear, or touch) and only what can be reproven to be true through experimentation and outward observation. Science would now be enthroned as the final court of appeals, while the Bible would be ridiculed as fable or at best sententious aphorisms.

Rationalism paves the way for "scientific" skepticism. Man may now demand of God proofs and evidences that satisfy their contrived definitions of truth. In their distorted view, the Bible does not deserve our trust until it is deemed worthy by the hard evidence and higher authority of scientific rationalism—which has no room for the divine or the miraculous.

Happy is the man who has bound his conscience to the Holy Bible and not been enslaved to the musings of "science falsely so called" I Timothy 6:20. What a sagacious word then is this, found in Psalms 131:1: "LORD, my heart is not haughty, nor mine eyes lofty: neither do I exercise myself in great matters, or in things too high for me." Truly the omniscient Creator, the originator of all wisdom, owes no man explanations.

Have a blessed week,

Pastor

Faith cometh by hearing: and hearing by the word of God Romans 10:17

The Sin of Sodom

Behold, this was the iniquity of thy sister Sodom, pride, fulness of bread, and abundance of idleness was in her and in her daughters, neither did she strengthen the hand of the poor and needy.

– Ezekiel 16:49 –

Sodom and Gomorrah forever stand as representatives of God's undiluted retributive justice. Sodom's inhabitants were militant in their evil, inventing wicked practices from reprobate hearts hardened in rebellious iniquity. Let us recall, however, that Sodom was not always the habitation of hopeless hellions. Jesus Himself said that had the city and its inhabitants heard the gospel, it would have remained to the time of Christ (Matthew 11:23), suggesting that there was significant hope for repentance in her inhabitants even at a late point in their history as a people.

So how did Sodom become synonymous with abominable sin? When citing Sodom's iniquity through the pen of the prophet Ezekiel, it is curious that God does not list their abominations as their most characteristic evil. Rather, he enumerates "pride, fulness of bread, and abundance of idleness" as the leading iniquity. Why? For our learning. We need to be ever mindful that there is a progression to evil. Because of the conscience that God has placed in the breast of every child of Adam, and due to the fact that Jesus is the light that lighteth every man that cometh into the world, all men and women everywhere, even in Sodom, possess both a negative and a positive witness to lead us back to our Creator. But as the conscience is violated time and again by sinful acts, it becomes dull, and each next step of transgression becomes simultaneously greater in magnitude, more destructive, and less inhibitive.

Pride, fulness of bread, and abundance of idleness. Let us who think we stand take heed lest we fall. This series of sins is the hallmark of any great nation, and can become acceptable even to God's people in the midst (e.g., Lot). Pride – believing we are blessed because we somehow deserve it. Fulness of bread – over-indulgence in legitimate temporal matters. Abundance of idleness – desiring relaxation and pastime more than the work that God has put us here to perform. When these things become the culture of a people, the descent toward detestable abominations has begun.

With God's help, let us ensure our hearts are not overcome with pride, fulness of bread, and abundance of idleness. And Lord God of heaven, please help our beloved land and her people see the Sodom-like spirit we as a nation have adopted, and repent.

-- D. Murcek

Bringing in Something Better

For the law made nothing perfect, but the bringing in of a better hope did; by the which we draw nigh unto God.

Hebrews 7:19

In the early days after being divinely delivered from the oppression of Egypt, the Lord gave Moses the commandments. By means of moral and ceremonial law, God's people now had structure to govern their lives, and a means of atoning (in type) for their sins. It brought structure and a form of unity to their culture but was still greatly lacking in its ability to develop a close relationship with God. Man's inability to perform the whole law was demonstrated throughout the Old Testament. Some of the great personalities of the Old Testament glaringly showed their failure at law keeping. Through repentance and offering a sacrifice for their sins, they still were personally prevented from entering into the holy place.

The advent of the Lord Jesus brought a better hope. The bringing of this better hope was announced by John the Baptist by saying *"Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world"*. It was not possible that all the previous inferior sacrifices could wash away sin and provide an entrance into God's presence. It was Jesus the Christ alone that brought a hope that would allow sinful people to find forgiveness through the shedding of His precious blood, and obtain a close relationship with the Heavenly Father. How much of a better hope we have, when we have the confidence that our home in heaven is secure. Instead of travelling through life with nagging doubts concerning our eternal destiny, we can have a certitude that relieves fears or worries about the future beyond our earthly existence.

After our conversion there can be a tendency of resorting to fleshly works and offerings as a means of drawing closer to God. Just as the Old Testament offerings of goats and bulls could not cleanse from sin; our own works also lack the efficacy to allow a close relationship with God. We must always remember our Lord Jesus brought a better hope that draws us nigh to God. May we live and thrive in that hope today!

J. Ekis

Unto Babes

At that time Jesus answered and said, I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes.

– Matthew 11:25 –

Pride is an awful thing. It lives within us from birth and tends to grow in size, strength, and scope with each passing moment of our existence. The more life experience we accumulate, the more our fleshly nature is puffed up. We enjoy being know-it-alls. We find it easy to judge others. We welcome adulation. Even after our conversion, we still find that this behemoth remains alive and well within us, and while it may no longer rule and reign, it nonetheless narrows our faith and stunts our spiritual growth if not placed in check on a daily basis.

Our God has woven spiritual lessons into man's physical and emotional existence. Jesus intimates in our text (as well as directly instructs us in many other passages) that if we study the nature of young children, we will find a remedy to the beast of pride. Children thrive on fellowship. They have a desire to know, and they learn quickly from their parents because they trust them. But they enjoy the security of the relationship much more than the acquisition of any knowledge. "Because Daddy and Mommy said so" is enough of an explanation for them as to the verity of many things about life and the world around them. It is not until pre-adolescence that learning becomes difficult and labored. This is where pride begins to take the place of innocence. The depth of intellectual growth begins to expand, but its velocity begins to wane. The desire for proof unfortunately begins to displace (or misplace) trust, and reason sadly begins to supersede faith. Much study proves weariness to the flesh, and intellectual satisfaction becomes a never-ending chase. How much happier is the young child whose understanding of the world around him is safely tucked in his father and mother's explanations and experience!

In Christ are hid the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. For the worldly wise and proudly prudent, there will never be any apprehension much less comprehension of these gems. They are reserved exclusively for the faithful sons and daughters of the Most High. Let us humble our hearts, lay aside our pride, and like toddlers on the knees of their parents, ask our Father our many questions, secure that His answers are true and faithful because of who He is and how He loves us.

-- D. Murcek