

2 SAMUEL 6:1-5, 12-19 (p. 244)

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EPHESIANS 1:3-14 (p. 946)

BLAINE

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

Too often Lord, we allow the “everydayness of life” to overwhelm us. That distracts us from the Truth, and blinds us to the reality of the Kingdom. Our priorities and values become muddied by “worldly things”. So, we come before you in Worship, to capture again, a vision of your Glory. Help us to do that now. Cause our hearts to be filled with your Presence. Speak to us this morning through your Word, through our Praise, and through our Prayers. And draw us close Lord, even now, and never let us go! We ask this in Jesus’ Name, Amen.

“GOD’S WAY OR OUR WAY?”

“Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has Blessed us in the Heavenly Realms with every Spiritual Blessing in Christ!” That’s a rather lofty proclamation, wouldn’t you say! Majestic even! Almost a Doxology! “Praise be to God”, “the Father of our Lord Jesus”, “who has Blessed us”! And not only “Blessed us” in the here and now, but has “Blessed us in the Heavenly Realms” as well, “With every Spiritual Blessing in Christ”! Try to get your head around that! “God chose us,” it says, “chose us before the Creation of the world”! That’s huge! The Lord of Heaven and Earth chose you and me, chose us “to be Holy and Blameless in His sight”! Which raises two questions, I think. First, “How does that make you feel?” Seriously, that God loves you personally, that much! And secondly, “Are you?” Are you “Holy” and “Blameless”?

But then, Paul goes on! “In love, God “Predestined us for Adoption”, “Redeemed us through Christ’s Blood”, “Forgave us our sins”, and “has made known to us, the Mystery of His Will”! Wait! What? We are “adopted”, and therefore “Heirs”? Redeemed from captivity? Set free from slavery? Forgiven? All by the sacrifice of God’s one and only Son? And we have been empowered to understand “the Mysteries of His Will”? Again! Wait! What? Talk about Blessings! And as a guarantee of that inheritance, we have been “marked with a Seal”, the “Promised Holy Spirit”?

Now I have a third question. “Why?” And a fourth. “How many you feel worthy of that?” I sure don’t! I’m clear on the “Guilt” thing that we talked about a couple of weeks ago! I know my shortcomings! Like David, they are ever before me! Therefore this “Grace” thing, detailed here by Paul, is a bit overwhelming! Not to mention the “Gratitude” thing that needs to follow! What would you say is a proper response to being forgiven, and redeemed, and adopted as an heir? Not to mention enlightened by the Holy Spirit to understand God’s Will? How should a Believer live under that Gracious Outpouring of Blessing, you know, in a way that gives all the Glory to God? How about, “Holy” and “Blameless”?

While I was contemplating these very questions, I happened on a Devotion from Sarah Young’s *Jesus Calling*. It started by saying, “I want you to experience the riches of your Salvation; the Joy of being loved constantly and perfectly.” And it ended with, “Fix your gaze on me”, “redirect your energy to praising me”. “Remember, I see you clothed in my Righteousness, radiant in My perfect Love.” I thought about what Paul was saying.

Then I turned to my Oswald Chambers' Devotion, "My Utmost for His Highest". It began with, "My vision of God is directly dependent upon the condition of my Character. My Character determines whether or not Truth can even be revealed to me. Before I can say, 'I saw the Lord,' there must be something in my Character that conforms to the likeness of God. Until I am Born Again, and begin to see the Kingdom of God, I only see from the perspective of my own biases."

It ended with, "Your priorities must be God first, God second, and God third, until your life is continually face-to-face with God, and no one else is taken into account whatsoever! Your prayer will then be, 'In all the world there is no one but you, dear God; there is no one but You.'" Again, I thought about Paul.

We're Blessed! Clearly! Right! Blessed in the Heavenly Realms! Enabled to know the Mysteries of God's Will! And that Covenant is Sealed with a Promise! Therefore, live accordingly! Which in case you didn't know, is Holy and Blameless!

I love Scripture! It's a Treasure Trove of Wisdom! Like it says in 2 Timothy 3:16, "All Scripture is God-breathed and useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work"! We have an entire Library of Truth here, a literal Library! That's what the word "Bible" means, by-the-way, "Books"! There are Historical Writings that witness to God's interaction with His people! There are Laws, rules to live by. We have Prophecies, some of which happened around the time of the Prophet, but others that are still unfolding!

There is Poetry in Scripture as well, and eyewitness accounts of God's People in action!

There are letters sent to encourage the Faithful! You might call it "God's Little Instruction Book for His Chosen People", or a "How-To Manual for Believers", or "Life, as God intends for it to be, for Dummies"! There is even a popular saying that the word "Bible" stands for "Basic Instructions Before Leaving Earth"! I like that! And we have been enabled to discern from this Library what God's Will actually is! That's quite a gift, don't you think!

But be honest. Would you call this book, "Ballads of the Holy and Blameless"? Or would you say it's more like, "Tales of Rebellion"? I mean, we see a lot of people "Missing the Mark" in here. And "all of us fall short of the Glory of God", right? Paul even confesses in Romans that "what I want to do, I do not do"! How is that, "Holy" and "Blameless"?

Paul, admittedly, can be a little "circular" in his writing at times. In fact, verse three through verse fourteen is one long, run-on sentence in the original Greek, with absolutely no punctuation marks whatsoever! And Paul often employs an old Rhetorical Speech Technique. "Tell them what you are about to tell them, then tell them, then tell them what you just told them"! So, we might need to unpack this a bit?

First of all, Paul is addressing ordinary people. The folks in Ephesus were a lot like us, a diverse group, a melting pot, a true cross-section of the local society. Ephesus was a busy Commercial Center though, so more like Traverse City than Benzie County.

And it was a place with lots and lots of tourists as well, coming and going all the time, so think of Traverse City during the Cherry Festival! Paul is talking to slaves, to those who feel trapped. But also, to those who feel quite free. He is writing to the well-off, but also to those who are not. He is addressing highly-educated people, and those who are not, the deeply pious, and the newly curious!

Some of the people in his audience work hard physically, each and every day. But others, simply do not! Some were old, and some were not. Some will respond to what he says, and some will not. But the first thing that he says to everyone, to all of us is, “You are Blessed”, so “Praise God”! In fact, because you are United with Christ, you are Blessed in the Heavenly Realms, with every Spiritual Blessing!

I’m not sure if they grasped the magnitude of what he was saying? Or even if we do? I don’t even know if the people were thankful when they realized this truth? But Paul tells them to stop and consider what God has done! He chose you, each one of you, before the Creation of the World! You are “Predestined”—which simply means, God knew ahead of time—Predestined, to be adopted as heirs through Jesus Christ, sons and daughters of the Promise! And God decided all of this before time even began! There is a Plan in place, a Grand Design, one that plays out on a Stage far-bigger than we can comprehend! And you are part of that plan! So, praise God!

Paul sort of pulls back the curtain of that Stage! He's giving us a momentary glimpse behind the veil! Paul is inviting us to peer Backstage, to take-in the entire Set, Background and all! And then, once we do, to become a part of the Majestic Drama ourselves, by living "Holy" and "Blameless" lives! You see, in doing that, we give Honor and Glory and Praise to God! We point to God with our lives, so that others might see!

You probably already know that the word "Holy" means "to be set apart for a Godly purpose". The Followers of Jesus are set apart—other, different, for a Holy Purpose—just like the Hebrew Nation before us! It started with Abraham, remember, way back! It continued with Moses, and the freeing of God's People from Captivity—crossing the Red Sea, receiving the Law at Mt. Sinai, being given the Promised Land.

There are Prophets, like Jonah and Isaiah and Jeremiah, Samuel and Nehemiah and Ezekiel "set apart" for a Godly Purpose, one which brings the Lord, Glory and Honor and Praise! There are all kinds of examples in fact, all through Scripture, of Holy People and Holy Things set apart by God for His Glory! Our role in this Drama is to be "Holy" and "Blameless"! You see, that points others to God!

Only that's not always what we see here in the "Tales of Rebellion", is it! I mean, what was one of the first statements in the Garden? "Don't", right? "Don't what," replied Adam. "Don't eat the forbidden fruit," said God. "Forbidden fruit? We have forbidden fruit? I didn't know we had forbidden fruit! Hey Eve, we have forbidden fruit!" No way!" says Eve. "Yeah way!" says Adam! "Do not eat the forbidden fruit," says God!

“But why?” we ask. “It looks good. I’m curious! Don’t you want me to be happy? What if I like it? Why not eat it, just this once? Why?” “Because I’m your Father, and I said so, that’s why”! But we went ahead and took an “apple break”, didn’t we! We often do! And when God says, “Didn’t I tell you not to eat the fruit”, we answer, “Yeah”. “Then why did you?” “I don’t know,” says Eve. “She started it,” says Adam. “Did not!”, “Did too!”, “Did not!”

Picture a two-year-old in what Psychologists call the “First Individuation Stage”. That’s us! Toddlers are trying to define “who they are”, separate from, or as opposed to, “who their parents are”! And there is a “Second Individuation Stage”! It usually happens somewhere in the early teen years! You know what I mean, right! It’s human nature, our nature, part of this world! But we are not called to witness to this world! We’re called to witness to the Glory of God!

Imagine how God must feel when we stand here, with our arms crossed in defiance, stomping our feet maybe, or having a tantrum! Imagine how frustrated He gets when we see ourselves as the center of the universe, where everything revolves around me and my desires, our wants and wishes! Imagine how He just shakes His head when we declare that “we can do it ourselves”! Or when we think “we” are in control, when we believe that what “we want” is what matters, or what’s best, even though we know the Mysteries of His Will! We’re not that far from Eden, are we?

Should it surprise us then, when the result of our rebellion brings the opposite of Blessings? Maybe even Divine Tough Love? Weren't Adam and Eve given a "time out" for their rebellion, booted from the Garden, sent away from God's Presence? Wasn't there later some kind of Flood because of global disobedience? Didn't we find ourselves captives in Egypt when we insisted on doing things our own way? Didn't we wander around in the Wilderness for a very long time, forty years to be exact, simply because we believed we knew how things ought to be?

Haven't we indeed, throughout the history of the world, time and time again, relived our "Terrible Twos"? Didn't we ignore the Prophets—those responsible adults that God sent to keep us in line! Didn't we simply refuse to pay attention to our older Brother in Redemption, God's own Son—the ultimate role model for us to follow? Isn't that the biblical story in a nutshell? Isn't that our "Tale of Rebellion"? Isn't that our story?

Take King David for example, one of the biblical greats, someone that God called "a man after His own heart"! He slipped into the mire of self-focus and self-reliance several times in his life! In our first reading today, we see him bringing the Ark of God up to Jerusalem with an entourage of thirty thousand chosen men, dancing in the streets! And well they should be! Almighty God has used David to unite the Northern and Southern Kingdoms, putting an end to a bloody Civil War! Wouldn't that be great here in the United States today! David has grown from a little shepherd boy into a beloved mighty King! We expect the dancing in the streets! We anticipate the sacrifices to God! We listen for the trumpets and visualize the festive meal, right!

Only prior to this, in verses six through eleven, which for some reason the Lectionary leaves out of today's lesson, we see a very different story! And it's a familiar story! One of disobedience and rebellion! You should read it sometime! David and the boys originally set off to do something that felt "right to them," not necessarily "right to God". Nowhere in Scripture do we see God telling David to go and undertake this mission! It was all his idea!

The Ark is the Holy Symbol of God's Presence with His people, and it represented God's leadership of Israel, God's authority. But David has taken it upon himself to decide where that symbol should reside, and how it should get there! In essence, David not only wants to unite the Kingdoms, but also cement his political power with religious authority! You see the problem, right? David wants the Ark in Jerusalem, the City of David, so that it will become Zion, the City of God! He wants to put a Halo on his Crown, if you will! Which makes perfect sense from a worldly point of view! But it's David's plan, not God's!

David builds a shiny new cart to carry the Ark on, instead of obeying the commands of God in Exodus to carry it on poles! David takes the focus off of obedience to the Lord, and places it upon himself as King! David forgets all about reverence and respect for the Lord, about honoring his Heavenly Father, about giving Him Glory. And things turn out rather badly!

While they are on their merry way—singing and playing tambourines and harps, rejoicing in themselves—one of the oxen pulling the cart, holding the Ark of God, stumbles. And all the rejoicing suddenly stops! Maybe there was a pothole? Maybe a mouse scurried across his path and the ox jumped in fear. Maybe the Ark of the Covenant was just so top-heavy that the whole thing started to teeter back and forth! In any case the Ark of God, God’s dwelling place on earth starts to tip! And Uzzah, a faithful priest, the son of a faithful priest, did what almost any of us would do! He reached out his hand to steady the load! It makes sense, right?

Only Scripture tells us that “The Lord’s anger burned against Uzzah because of his ‘irreverent act’, and God struck him down, right then and there, and he died beside the Ark of the God.” That sounds kind of harsh, doesn’t it? Wasn’t Uzzah just trying to do the right thing, at least from his perspective? But it was his way, not God’s way.

And David’s response seems a bit out of line as well. Verse eight says that, “David was angry because the Lord’s wrath had broken out against Uzzah”! I agree, the whole thing seems unfair, at least from our perspective. But then, so did mom telling you not to touch the hot stove.

David was mad because his plans had gotten messed up, because he didn’t get his way! In short, David had gotten way too big for his britches! It was only after “repentance”, and “obedience”, only after doing things God’s way, for God’s Glory, that we find him dancing in the streets today! I wonder if there is a lesson here!

We are Blessed! Each and every one of us! We are Blessed by God! The Lord has “Lavished” his Grace upon us! Forgiven us! Redeemed us! And we have been given the Wisdom to comprehend all this, to understand God’s Will! More importantly, we have been grafted into the Family of God, through Christ Jesus! And sealed with the Holy Spirit as a guarantee! And all of this was planned ahead of time! Scripted by God!

Now it’s our turn to step up! The Call has come! The Cue has been given! It’s time to walk boldly onto the Stage and live “Holy” and “Blameless” lives! So that “we who put our hope in Christ might be a form of Praise to His Glory”! And all of God’s people said, Amen!

PASTORAL PRAYER

O Holy God, we are indeed your people, the folks you have called together in the Name of your Son, to witness to your world. We are those whom you have Ordained to be Salt and Light in a dark and decaying world. Help us now to truly “season” and “shine” wherever we go!

We are called to be different Lord. And by doing so, to boldly point to you. You have called us to be powerful instruments of your Peace and your Presence, to radiate your love and teach others your will. So, we ask you to walk beside us Lord, each and every day, so that we may constantly hear your voice, and travel down the paths that you would have us take. And Lord, as we do, please pour out upon us Wisdom and Understanding. Make known to us the Mysteries of your Will. Cause us to be Holy and Blameless in your sight. And please, strengthen us along the journey.

Father, we have some fellow sojourners right now who are especially in need of your Strength and Support. Please fill them with your Peace as well. Please grant Healing to their bodies and Joy to their lives. Please shower Blessings upon them. And touch them with your own Hand. And please, enable us and encourage us to do the same. Father, we lift up before your Throne of Grace..... We also lift up this world, our leaders, and those in authority. It seems like such a troubled place right now. So divided! So full of violence and hate! There is so much distrust these days, and so many divisions, and so many places where evil seems to abound! So please, Father, pour out healing on your creation.

We ask these things in the Name of your Son, our Risen Savior Jesus Christ. And in His Name, we lift up together the very prayer that He has taught us, saying, Our Father...

COMMUNION

Today we're taking another step in returning to Worship as "normal". In First Service, we will be doing Communion by Intinction, dipping the Bread into a Common Cup. Then circling around the Sanctuary for our Benediction. Please feel free to use a pre-packaged Communion Cup from the chair in front of you if that's uncomfortable. Either bring it with you, or simply partake where you are. Whatever feels right is absolutely perfect.

In Second Service, we will be passing Communion Trays. Again, if that is uncomfortable, please feel free to use the pre-packaged Communion Cups in the chairs in front of you. What's important is sharing together as the Body of Christ.

Taking this next step in returning to Worship made me think of God's People in the Promised Land. After building the Temple to the Lord, Solomon and the people dedicated it. They gave Offerings and Prayers. They made Sacrifices. And most importantly, they rededicated themselves. They had worked hard to become a people and a nation, and now they were publicly acknowledging that all their Blessings came directly from the Hand of God. It reminded me of our Scripture Lessons for today. As a part of God's response to them, He offered this Promise from 2 Chronicles 7:14.

“If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray, and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land.”

There is a lot in that Promise, isn’t there. Today, we come to the Table of Promise.