

Boasting And Radiant

Bible Reading:

Psalm 34

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There are those occasions - all of us run into them -
occasions that drag us down.

There may be big threats that we encounter; bearing down on us like a speeding jet, and threatening to explode into our lives, broadside.

They happen, but we rarely - thankfully - see those coming.

What we end up doing is struggling with the fallout, sometimes for years.

The stroke.

Told that - thank you - you **will** retire.

The run away.

There are also, more often, the more quiet situations, ones that sit in our lives like weights around our ankles.

Always there.

Can't quite shake them.

Sapping our energy.

Wearing us down.

A skill we've been trying to master and just can't quite get.

A promotion that simply doesn't come.

A relationship which irritates and refuses to smooth over.

A physical ailment that never seems to improve.

David, son of Jesse, experienced both in heaping loads.

1 Samuel 21 tells the story. David had gone from a quiet life tending to sheep to being a servant in the king's house, to being Israel's most wanted man, target of a paranoid king's obsessed anger.

He's on the run.

Never sure where he'll sleep tonight, let alone tomorrow.

Never sure if a posse is waiting over the next hill.

He gets into the courts of a neighboring king, someone from the dynasty of Abimelech, king Achish. Once there, he realizes it isn't as safe as first hoped. And he has to play the role of a madman in order to escape. Which he does.

It's only one instance in an ongoing, stressful saga.

So many forces are stacked up against him.

Will he ever get out of it?

What happened to the quiet days in the fields?

Here's how people sometimes respond when life feels like a bed of nails:

- Suicide: the temptation to call it quits and bail on life. Rarely does it ever get acted on, but you'd be surprised at the number of people who host thoughts about ending it all - regularly.

- Run and hide: go where no one can find me. Disappear. Live low profile. Just me and the remote. Don't answer the phone. Take a minimal job and live at a slow simmer, at best.

- Turn bitter and hard: then everything in life becomes a fight. Everyone becomes a potential enemy. Your emotions become cold. Love dies. Joy evaporates.

I'd like to invite you to read Psalm 34 with me. It is the poem David wrote after his escape from Achish, Philistine king out of the dynasty of Abimalech.

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I hope that you appreciate how this psalm comes to us -

- it is real life, written by a graduate from the school of hard knocks.
- not just wishful thinking.
- not some fine-sounding but cheap theory.
- it is very, very real.

Not a lot of religious dogma here.

Instead it comes as an example and an invitation.

An example of how David dealt with the draining challenges of his life.

An invitation for other believers to join him as they face the particular challenges of their own lives.

If you've had a hard week and are about to fall asleep on me, let me quickly pass along the secret.

Here's the punch line - instead of focusing on the circumstances of life, focus on the character of God.

One more time:

*Instead of focusing on the circumstances of life,
focus on the character of God.*

Life is not always fair.

But God remains - strong, all-knowing, all-wise, good.

Focus on Him.

Let's click the "zoom" icon from our toolbar and zero in on the opening three verses of Psalm 34.

I invite you to say them with me:

1. *I will bless the Lord at all times;
His praise shall continually be in my mouth.*
2. *My soul makes its boast in the LORD;
let the humble hear and be glad.*
3. *O magnify the LORD with me,*

and let us exalt his name together.

So, here's the invitation.

An invitation to make a choice.

To choose the discipline of remembering the character of the God who cares about us. Even when life seems to stack up against us. When everything feels like Robert Marley's chains - even then, choosing to focus on the character of God instead of focusing on the circumstances of life.

It's what brings David through.

We've invited to choose the same.

To make that a discipline for the spiritual strength, stamina and vitality of our souls, just as we choose a program of exercise and proper diet to build the strength, stamina and vitality of our bodies. You may get along without such a program, but your immunity to disease, your stamina for difficult physical tasks and your energy levels will all drop to subsistence levels.

Verse 1 -

I will bless the Lord at all times.

The Psalm begins with that - *I will bless....*

The root Hebrew word used here is one that means "to adore with bended knee..." The particular derivative is the one that gives us the word "to bless."

What it gives us is the idea that blessing God is something based on humility. One of things that is really too bad about the Protestant heritage is that by and large we have lost the tradition of kneeling in worship and devotion - private and public. Not sure why. John Calvin speaks of it as though it were a natural part of life, like eating or drinking.

Pity that we've lost it. Because, you see, kneeling down is a guaranteed pride breaker. Hard to be arrogant and proud when you're bent down in front of someone. Whatever else you say about the Muslims, dropping their nose in the dirt before God says in very physical ways who is in charge.

I will take the circumstances of my life and lay them down before God.

I will take my reputation and drop it before Him.

I will take my proud posture and fold it over.

I will lower my head.

I **will** do these things!!

And I'll do them **at all times**.

The second line of the poem reads this way in Hebrew:

Continually his praise is in my mouth.

The way it is structured is meant to focus attention on the **continually**. We'd underline it and print it in bold face type. Big font.

It **will** be this way!

Yes it will!

For sure!

Circumstances of life are going to have to play second fiddle.
My hopes and ambitions will have to slide into the back seat.
The praise of God will come first.

Continually.

Ongoing.

Never done with the project of praise.

Keeping it up so that becomes a state of being - part of who we are.

Continually.

Point 1 - bowed down praise.

Point 2 - continual bowed down praise.

Then, beginning of verse 2 - continual, bowed down praise of **the LORD**.

It doesn't read well in English, and so translators smooth things out -

but in Hebrew the very first word of the line is **the LORD**.

Focus belongs there - on Yahweh.

In Yahweh will my soul make its boast.

The New Testament points to the same thing:

I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. (Phil 3:8)

We boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ... (Rom 5:11)

And we do that with our souls -

- in other words with the very deepest parts of our being.

Want to know how to make something truly a part of you, something to be part of your life in deep, inextricable ways?

Practice it.

Keep it up.

Do it again and again and again.

Make it habit - yes, habits **can** be good!

Continually - a focus on Yahweh rather than on the circumstances of life.

I invite you to make the choice to live that way.

Boast of God.

Did you know that boasting can be good?

Not in the way of talking up our own accomplishments - you know, the sort of talk that goes around a locker room after the game. "*Did you see how I dug the puck out of the corner?*"

"Did you see the pass?"

Or the coffee talk about accomplishments at home.

Or proudly touring folks through your garden.

Boast of God -

Talk up His reputation.

Speak of His person.

Draw peoples' attention to His accomplishments.

Last week we discussed how testimonies are really a good idea.

Let's refine that a little bit.

Testimonies **that draw peoples attention to God** are really a good idea.

Testimonies that leave people knowing God better are really a good idea.

As David says:

Let the humble hear and be glad.

Or other translations - *let the afflicted hear and be glad.*

When a person is down, they are often looking for some sign of hope in life.

They look for something to restore their faith in the future.

A testimony about the reliability, the rock-solid enduring faithfulness of God, can be that beacon in what otherwise is a dark night season of their soul.

There are two Hebrew words here that draw attention to that:

- the word for hearing
- the word for being glad
 - *shamah* (hearing)
 - *samach* (being glad)

The poet puts them side by side to emphasis that hearing someone boast about God goes side by side with growing gladness about being alive.

There's more than enough challenge, frustration and discouragement to go around. More than enough to rip at the sunshine in my life.

And so I need to regularly hear about the presence, care and goodness of God to build joy and gladness within me.

People often say to me, "*Pastor Ken, what a difficult job you have - all those sick and dying people. All the counseling problems people. bring.*"

True enough.

But what I **also** get to be part of is the sharing of story after story of how God has remained rock solid in people's journey through decade after decade of living. That's a special blessing, particularly among the elderly who have lived so long and seen so much and can point to occasion after occasion where God has held on to them when everything else fell apart.

I get to hear them speak about that. Boasting about God. Boasting about the One who sent His only Son to destroy death that they could have hope of eternal life. Boasting about Christ, whose constant prayers to the Father have brought tangible inner strength, and whose Spirit has been a real counselor and encourager to them.

I hear of this. And I go away gladdened.

So -

verse 3: *magnify the LORD with me;
and let us exalt his name together!*

What are you going to talk about after church?

What about prayer & share - would you be willing to share a thank-you to God for prayers answered?

What about when sharing a coffee with someone?

You know - one of the things that describes our culture is the prevalence of support groups. And that's not a bad thing. You can argue all you want, but the reality is that human beings are not meant to live entirely alone. We need each other -
- just like logs in the fire need each other.

Some of you have done camping this summer, right?
Have you ever been able to light a camp fire with just one piece of wood?
Remember what happens when you knock the logs of the fire apart - separate them from each other?

For a fire to burn, you need more than one log, and they have to be touching each other.

For our lives to light up,
we need to be with others,
and our lives have to touch.

*Magnify the Lord..... with me;
Let us exalt His name..... together!*

Know what the Church is?
It is a *Hope Support Group*

Here's Calvin's mission statement:

As members of a community that seeks to glorify God we commit to sharing the life-changing message of Christ with our neighbors and each other.

Being together.
Boasting in the Lord.
Sharing encouragement.
And finding our lives changed,
renewed,
recharged
as a result.

Nehemiah, cupbearer to the king, said in the middle of his ambitious project to rebuild Jerusalem,

The joy of the Lord is your strength. (Neh 8:10b)

As we bless Yahweh, we are blessed.
As we do that together, our lives brighten.

It's the invitation for us to follow.

It's the way of life.

Join me in making it a more intentional part of our community this summer and this coming season.