

Songs of the Spirit/Psalms for the Seasons of Life

Longing (#2)

Psalm 42; 63; 84.1-4

7.14.13

As the deer pants for the water brooks, So my soul pants for You, O God. ² My soul thirsts for God, for the living God; When shall I come and appear before God? ³ My tears have been my food day and night, While they say to me all day long, "Where is your God?" ⁴ These things I remember and I pour out my soul within me. For I used to go along with the throng and lead them in procession to the house of God, With the voice of joy and thanksgiving, a multitude keeping festival. ⁵ Why are you in despair, O my soul? And why have you become disturbed within me? Hope in God, for I shall again praise Him For the help of His presence. ⁶ O my God, my soul is in despair within me; Therefore I remember You from the land of the Jordan And the peaks of Hermon, from Mount Mizar. ⁷ Deep calls to deep at the sound of Your waterfalls; All Your breakers and Your waves have rolled over me. ⁸ The LORD will command His lovingkindness in the daytime; And His song will be with me in the night, A prayer to the God of my life. ⁹ I will say to God my rock, "Why have You forgotten me? Why do I go mourning because of the oppression of the enemy?" ¹⁰ As a shattering of my bones, my adversaries revile me, While they say to me all day long, "Where is your God?" ¹¹ Why are you in despair, O my soul? And why have you become disturbed within me? Hope in God, for I shall yet praise Him, The help of my countenance and my God.

(Psa 63) O God, You are my God; I shall seek You earnestly; My soul thirsts for You, my flesh yearns for You, In a dry and weary land where there is no water. ² Thus I have seen You in the sanctuary, To see Your power and Your glory. ³ Because Your lovingkindness is better than life, My lips will praise You. ⁴ So I will bless You as long as I live; I will lift up my hands in Your name. ⁵ My soul is satisfied as with marrow and fatness, And my mouth offers praises with joyful lips. ⁶ When I remember You on my bed, I meditate on You in the night watches, ⁷ For You have been my help, And in the shadow of Your wings I sing for joy. ⁸ My soul clings to You; Your right hand upholds me. ⁹ But those who seek my life to destroy it, Will go into the depths of the earth. ¹⁰ They will be delivered over to the power of the sword; They will be a prey for foxes. ¹¹ But the king will rejoice in God; Everyone who swears by Him will glory, For the mouths of those who speak lies will be stopped.

(Psa 84.1-4) How lovely are Your dwelling places, O LORD of hosts! ² My soul longed and even yearned for the courts of the LORD; My heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God. ³ The bird also has found a house, And the swallow a nest for herself, where she may lay her young, Even Your altars, O LORD of hosts, My King and my God. ⁴ How blessed are those who dwell in Your house! They are ever praising You.

Last week we started a series looking at Songs of the Spirit – how God the Spirit shapes us using this core of the Bible, the poetic summary of the Old Testament, The Book of Psalms.

And after last week's invitation to the Book of Psalms and the introduction to the series, this week we begin to look at this outline used in Howard Macy's book called Rhythms of the Inner Life. He suggests that the Psalms capture the seasons or cycles that all people experience who really come to know God. It's not that these "rhythms" are steps or rungs on a ladder but that

believers often find themselves in these sort of distinct phases in our walk with God and the Psalms help us to interpret these seasons and to articulate ourselves in these different moments “the vocabulary of the soul” (Peterson).

The soul’s journey toward God always begins with the season we’re thinking about TODAY and the journey returns to this place at various times. It’s the season of “longing”. In some sense we never leave this season until this life is over. It’s sometimes so deep and profound that it pushes out everything else and CAN descend into another season we hope to discuss in a few weeks.

These three Psalms USE the language of longing or desire... “As the deer pants...thirsts...seeks...yearns... longs...” So, today, we consider this whole category of human life, desire. Is it a problem? Are YOU, in fact, fixated on some desire or drive or yearning that has become a preoccupation or even an obsession or addiction? OR do you know someone for whom desire is too much...or misdirected... or uncontrollable? The season of longing: Let’s think about the dilemma of desire, direction of desire and then practical steps for dealing with desire. I think almost everyone here today has known someone (or **been** someone) for whom desire has been a problem.

The publisher’s description Gerald May’s book called Addiction and Grace uses these words, “a compassionate and wise treatment of a topic of major concern in these most addictive of times...”

Yes! A major concern...and these “most addictive of times”: all kinds of addictions claiming all kinds of people in these times. Food addictions, sex, drugs, alcohol, adrenaline, gambling, people (co-dependency – people addicted to addicts), shopping. The movie Fight Club is about someone who became addicted to addiction groups – that was his only addiction (recovery groups). And addiction is among other things, a desire disorder.

Boredom is another desire disorder. It’s a kind of despair or withdrawal from life, a loss of engagement or loss of desire.

AND there are any number of moral and religious and spiritual approaches to “desire disorders”. In Buddhism, for instance, the real problem with the world is suffering and the real cause of suffering is desire. People suffer because they desire pleasure; pleasure is fleeting. Pursuit of one’s desires can only lead to frustration. So, to manage desire OR better yet to achieve “Nirvana” which means the extinguishing of all desire is the highest good.

For some people, the role of religion or morality is to sort of curb desire, to promote the way of moderation. I think of the movie Babette’s Feast, a community of Danish Christians...very holy and disciplined and self-controlled because they’ve eradicated desire (or at least buried it) and along with it all imagination and joy and love. Or the character Uriah Heep from David Copperfield; he’s always talking about his Spartan lifestyle which he calls “umble” as if this were

the truly godly and good way to live – desires in check is the main thing! It's often seen or at least portrayed as the Christian way.

And of course, Jesus Christ did speak of self-denial. So...IS that the Christian way? Is moderation and even abstinence the Christian answer to desire? Is self-mastery...self-denial...self-renunciation...the goal of Christianity?

Well if it IS then why does Jesus Christ say, "For whoever wishes to SAVE his life shall lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake shall FIND it." (Mat 16.25)? He speaks as if FINDING LIFE is the goal.

In Jesus Christ's teaching and in His example, self-renunciation, self-denial and moderation are not the goal but instead a means to an end. And the dilemma of desire for the Christian is NOT solved by doing away with desire, not even by moderating it or somehow toning it down... but actually by cultivating desire and redirecting it. The goal is LIFE and the satisfaction of desire!

Listen, once again to the Psalms, "As the deer pants for the water brooks, so my soul pants for you, O God...thirsts for God...WHEN will I be with you?" Those are NOT weak desires... those are raging desires. The greatest possible intensity... "deep calls to deep". (42.7)

"I will seek you earnestly" (literal trans, "early", as if to say, "I can't wait to get up and get to it!") "My soul THIRSTS for You...my flesh yearns for You in a dry and weary land without water...Your love is better than life itself...I meditate on You in the night watches". That's a way of saying, "I can't fall asleep at night because I'm thinking about YOU." These are the words of someone in love!

Then the intense words of Psalm 84 "My soul longed and even yearned for the courts of the LORD." Not moderate desires.

But they are... redirected desires.

The great OT scholar Walter Brueggemann said that all the Psalms are basically in one of three categories: Psalms of Orientation, Disorientation or Reorientation. And here you see these writers going through the re-orientation or redirection of desire.

And in the redirection process, they wrestle with themselves, their circumstances, their enemies and even with God. They're bold and almost uncomfortably open and honest with God, "I have poured out my soul with in me...Why have You forgotten me?" (63.4,9)

He questions his own emotional state, "Why are you in despair, O my soul?" and they counsel themselves, "Hope in God!" They preach to themselves and persuade themselves that God is indeed trustworthy because they've seen it, "For You have been my help, and in the shadow of Your wings I sing for joy (Psa 63.7) They become confident that He will give them what they

DESIRE and long to have – He will give Himself! The 42nd Psalm ends, “the help of my countenance and my God” – literally, “the yeshua panim” – the salvation of my presence/face.

And we see it even more clearly: when these OT believers are screaming, “When will I come and appear before God?”, it’s as if God is answering, “I will come and I will appear before you...and I will be the Yeshua Panim – the salvation of your presence. I will take on your panim, your face, your presence and I will give Myself that completely to you!”

Even in their worst moments, when disoriented and opposed by people who hated and mocked them, these OT believers knew that God would not forget His agreement, His promise, His hesed, His Gospel and He would give them their desires... not moderately but lavishly....but could they ever have known how fully He meant to come through for them. And in the fullness of time, God took on the face of man and saved them... fulfilled their desires beyond what anyone imagined.

And God even traded place with us to the point of absorbing our thirst when in Jesus Christ, His desires were frustrated so ours could be met...He cries out in that part of “cosmic thirst” – “I am dried up...I am depleted...I THIRST... and a jar full of sour wine was standing there; so they put a sponge full of the sour wine upon a branch of hyssop and brought it up to His mouth. Therefore when Jesus had received the sour wine, He said, "It is finished!" And He bowed His head and gave up His spirit.” (John 19.29-30)

C.S. Lewis said that our desires are not too strong and unmanageable for God but way too weak. “Indeed, if we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.” (The Weight of Glory)

When you consider these Psalm writers... with the little they knew about the world to come... the shadowy promises they had (at least in comparison to what we now know of what Jesus Christ accomplished) and when you see how far God surpassed what they were hoping for...it just spurs you on to trust more completely than they did... and they desired and trusted pretty intensely... but we can trust more. It’s like were given a sum to invest in the stock market and we have already been given next year’s newspaper so we KNOW how those investments pay out... why would we want to hold anything back? Why not wager it all?

So how DO we go about it...how do we deal with desire if it’s not just “desire management” or “toning it down and being austere and grim and moderate”?

Well, for one thing we follow the Psalmist’s examples. We will have to wrestle with “wars without and fears within”. We will have to be sometimes audacious in our open and honest

wrestlings with God. “Lord, I need You but I have no sense that You’re there for me...” AND will have to wrestle with ourselves...to preach to and persuade ourselves, to question our emotional state, “Why are you downcast, O my soul?” and then come back to redirected desire...reorientation: “Hope in God...the yeshua pannim i.e. the salvation of my face...the One who wore our face and saved our humanity...Yeshua, Jesus Christ, the God-Man”

We say it a lot here at St. Andrews, “we have to learn to preach the Gospel to ourselves everyday” and we definitely have the example in the Psalms!

Secondly, what do we do with desires for food and beer and sex and shopping and fun and television? If it’s not moderation or abstinence... then is it... addiction and obsession? Is there a Christian way of dealing with desire? Well, food and beer and sex and shopping are ... wonderful and dangerous. In the world to come they will only be wonderful... not addictive. In the meantime, “Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.” (1Co 10.31) If you can’t eat chocolate or use a credit card in communion with the Lover of your soul... then those pleasures may not be for you in the here and now. You may have to wait for that day when they are only wonderful and not addictive and dangerous. If, however you can use sex and money and wine moderately and IN relationship with God... then do...but don’t hurt others who don’t have that kind of freedom. Moderation IS a Christian virtue... but it’s not the whole story. Sometimes powerful pleasures (like some of the things I’ve mentioned), these can be like a taste of heaven AND can also enslave and addict and become idols, which stand between us and the Lover of our soul. In that case, we need not moderation...but mortification... to militate against anything that dulls our desire for the One who IS Pleasure Himself... idols never make good on their promises.

Third, beware of filling up on junk food. A feast awaits and technology and entertainment and fantasy and the applause of people all these things and more can be used and enjoyed but can also be counterfeit forms of transcendence. You’ll know they’re filling you with emptiness if your hunger for God is waning... They CAN be the mud pies in the slum that keeps us from imagining the other shore. (On the other hand, some desires/pleasures can actually suggest transcendence... art...music and thus stir up a bigger desire for God and His presence)

What IF you are not hungry and thirsty for God? Is there anything you can do about it? Why, yes there is! You can pray and God may answer your prayer the way He answered David... and Job... and Mary. He may bring you into the wilderness. That’s where David was when he wrote this 63rd Psalm...running from his adult son Absalom who had become insane with hatred and envy and wanted to kill his own father... David was fleeing for his life...and it made David desperately clear-minded and thirsty for the God who loved him infinitely. Sometimes...well... oftimes (it appears from the Psalms) the way God answers the prayers of His children for their happiness is to make them thirst for the one thing that can really make them happy which is NOT so much His gifts as HIMSELF and the way He engenders that clarified, voracious thirst is through opposition and difficulty. Still it’s worthwhile to pray for happiness. It always ends well.

Last, maybe you're not connected to God at all and aren't really even thirsty for Him. To you I would say, "do you want to be thirsty...I mean for real happiness... happiness like you've never imagined?" Because even if you have a little thirst... to be thirsty... in fact if you don't really want to be thirsty...but maybe want to want to be thirsty... even that is from God.

Every person who really comes to know Him by grace says with David, in that wonderful paradox from the middle reading, Psalm 63.8, "My soul clings to You; Your right hand upholds me."

It's a huge comfort to know that while I think I'm seeking God and clinging to Him...God is holding me.

God uses His stronger hand, His right hand, to hold me up. I'm only clinging to Him because He enables it... If you're thirsty at all...even thirsty to be thirsty, then start responding...pray! Begin to acknowledge and thank God. Hang around thirsty people. "How blessed are those who dwell in Your house! They are ever praising You". (Psa 84.4)