

Songs of the Spirit/Psalms for the Seasons of Life

Waiting (#3)

Psalm 40; 123

7.21.13

Psalm 40 *I waited patiently for the LORD; And He inclined to me and heard my cry. ² He brought me up out of the pit of destruction, out of the miry clay, And He set my feet upon a rock making my footsteps firm. ³ He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God; Many will see and fear And will trust in the LORD. ⁴ How blessed is the man who has made the LORD his trust, And has not turned to the proud, nor to those who lapse into falsehood. ⁵ Many, O LORD my God, are the wonders which You have done, And Your thoughts toward us; There is none to compare with You. If I would declare and speak of them, They would be too numerous to count. ⁶ Sacrifice and meal offering You have not desired; My ears You have opened; Burnt offering and sin offering You have not required. ⁷ Then I said, "Behold, I come; In the scroll of the book it is written of me. ⁸ I delight to do Your will, O my God; Your Law is within my heart." ⁹ I have proclaimed glad tidings of righteousness in the great congregation; Behold, I will not restrain my lips, O LORD, You know. ¹⁰ I have not hidden Your righteousness within my heart; I have spoken of Your faithfulness and Your salvation; I have not concealed Your lovingkindness and Your truth from the great congregation. ¹¹ You, O LORD, will not withhold Your compassion from me; Your lovingkindness and Your truth will continually preserve me. ¹² For evils beyond number have surrounded me; My iniquities have overtaken me, so that I am not able to see; They are more numerous than the hairs of my head, And my heart has failed me. ¹³ Be pleased, O LORD, to deliver me; Make haste, O LORD, to help me. ¹⁴ Let those be ashamed and humiliated together Who seek my life to destroy it; Let those be turned back and dishonored Who delight in my hurt. ¹⁵ Let those be appalled because of their shame Who say to me, "Aha, aha!" ¹⁶ Let all who seek You rejoice and be glad in You; Let those who love Your salvation say continually, "The LORD be magnified!" ¹⁷ Since I am afflicted and needy, Let the Lord be mindful of me. You are my help and my deliverer; Do not delay, O my God.*

Psalm 123 *To You I lift up my eyes, O You who are enthroned in the heavens! ² Behold, as the eyes of servants look to the hand of their master, As the eyes of a maid to the hand of her mistress, So our eyes look to the LORD our God, Until He is gracious to us. ³ Be gracious to us, O LORD, be gracious to us, For we are greatly filled with contempt. ⁴ Our soul is greatly filled With the scoffing of those who are at ease, And with the contempt of the proud.*

We've been looking at *Songs of the Spirit* – how God the Spirit forms and transforms the character of the believer and *does so, in part, using this core of the Bible, the poetic summary of the Old Testament, The Book of Psalms...* God takes us here to show us how to

pray. We learn to relate to God; we learn the vocabulary of the soul (Peterson) in the Book of Psalms. And within the Psalms we find these rhythms or seasons of the inner life.

Last week, we looked at the season that is always at the start of the spiritual life and TO WHICH we return again and again, the season of LONGING and deep desire (“As the deer pants for the water brooks, so my soul pants after Thee, O God”). God awakens in us this longing for a home where we’ve never been... we begin to see that nothing on earth can satisfy this implanted THIRST for God.

This week... right after we get redirected in our desires and I begin to see that what I really want and need is not the applause of people or to feel good about myself...not stuff or any earthly expression of truth, beauty or goodness – what I want is the Source of truth, beauty and goodness – the *PERSON* of Truth Beauty and Goodness, God Himself... AND when our desire is redirected in that way...we think we’ve arrived. We THINK we’re going to be totally changed...and we are... the change begins... but our character responds...sometimes very slowly. And our circumstances may not change at all – or may even get worse. So we move from LONGING...to WAITING and sometimes... this waiting can be unanticipated and thus very disorienting... So, the Psalms help.

Let’s look at this *season of waiting*... 1. what is it and why do we need it?... 2. how do we get it? and 3. how to actually put it to use so it benefits you and others?

We’re calling this thing, this rhythm or season of the spiritual life, we’re calling it “waiting” (that’s what Howard Macy calls it in his book) and that word IS found in these Psalms and other Psalms and in many other places in our English translations...But, just like there’s a range of meaning for that word in English, so also in the Hebrew of the Bible.

We speak of “the waiting room” where people sit sort of passively and PATIENTLY and in fact those people are often called “patients”. And sometimes that’s the meaning of the word in the Psalms – “just wait and be patient, this is NOT going to happen on your timetable”.

But, there are other uses as well...For instance, some people wait for a living, to wait on another person in the sense that you await instruction and that you serve, a waiter. And there’s nothing passive about that kind of waiting.

There can be, as in the second reading, Ps. 123, a sense of looking...of anticipating...of expectation and trust...as an employee depends on his employer. There’s a sense of confidence. Also, his waiting may somehow have a sense of urgency and exclusivity... (somehow, waiting patiently and with a sense of urgency can go together). As if to say, “I’m

centered on this one Source and if God doesn't come through for me...then all is lost... all my hope is in Him alone... Psalm 73, "Whom have I in heaven but YOU? (my only Hope and Defender)". And so this sense of waiting often implies a single-mindedness and dependence, of looking to, or gazing upward, of thinking about.

We could use some synonyms like a contemplative person...an inwardly composed person...a focused, prayerful person...a centered person...grounded and deeply self-aware...who practices the disciplines of solitude and silence and simplicity, meditation and prayer. Does that describe you? Are you this waiting person? Do you want to be?

And add to this description the results: the person who IS this contemplative person, focused and practicing this kind of detachment from earthly things and a focused WAITING, dependence and this wise self-knowledge... the person who WAITS in this way is also the person who gets helped.

"They that wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength" wrote Isaiah (40), "they will mount up with wings like eagles, walk and not be tired; they will run and not become weary." These Psalms as well as many, many more in the Book of Psalms, constantly hold out this paradox: Waiting on the Lord is the path of refreshment and of real lasting help and change and growth and renewal and new songs/joy.

Psalm 40 starts, "I waited patiently..." but the Hebrew has it, "I waited...waited on the LORD" to say, "I waited...I mean really waited...on the LORD... I did NOT hedge my bets...I put all my eggs in HIS basket!"

And the *outcome* for this spiritually-minded, centered and self-aware and contemplative person... *the result of waiting is rescue and help and a new start and a new song* so that not only HE but others benefit AND GOD is seen as the source, "He brought me up out of the pit of destruction, out of the miry clay, And He set my feet upon a rock making my footsteps firm. He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God; *many* will see and fear and will trust in the LORD. (Psa 40.2-3)

So, what keeps us from it? Why don't more of us become these centered, contemplative people who are rescued and renewed and helped and really HELPFUL – pointing others to God, through our being helped and "many" come to see God, stand in awe and worship and trust? Why are we not contemplative waiters and if not that...than what?

Well, one thing that opposes this life is noise? Cell phones and broadcast media and... beeps...and blips and buzzers...and bells.

Another is what AW Tozer called "The Great God Entertainment"...also a source of noise and distraction (the opposite of focus).

Another impediment to becoming the contemplative waiter (who really gets help and IS a help to many) is that we're not convinced that this is an efficient way to live. It looks wasteful to do nothing, to meditate and contemplate and look up and be silent. We're led to believe that busy-ness is next to godliness and the ones who really change the world are busy-est. "Hey, how's it goin'?" ... "Oh...stayin' busy..." "Great!"

It's one thing to be pragmatic...it's another thing to be a pragmatist. And most of us are just that, so fixated on efficiency and activity and doing that we can't see the real nature of things, the nature of the world and its problems and the solutions that only God can effect.

Underneath it all...never able to put down the phone... or risk not being informed up to the minute MAY be an inflated sense of self...a self-importance that is worse than idolatry because it doesn't only worship something that is NOT God but puts the self in the place of God. And in the midst of our busy lives... seeing the contemplative life as lazy or as "too heavenly minded to be any earthly good", we are missing out on the real help that we desperately need...we're left NOT centered...off-kilter and (as verse 1 puts it) "mired in nothingness and without traction."

And yet right in the middle of this Psalm is the Way over these obstacles and the Way to a life of inner quiet and new joy. We've been saying that the School of Prayer, in the middle of the Bible only makes sense when we see the Messiah singing these songs of the Spirit. Verses 6-10 are quoted in the NT Book of Hebrews and are said, there, to refer to Jesus Christ. He is the Singer of this Psalm.

He is the Waiter who says "behold, I have come (in the scroll of the book it is written of me) to do your will, O God...then He said, 'BEHOLD, I HAVE COME TO DO YOUR WILL.'"

Jesus Christ came into the world to do all the will of His Father. He is the Waiter...He is the absolutely focused, centered and attentive servant. He is the true Contemplative who often withdrew to a quiet place to meet with His Father and was the delight of His Father's eye... and He delights to do all the will of Him who sent Him into the world.

God the Son, without a beginning, eternally begotten of the Father and His perfect reflection had from eternity been in closest relationship and love. If God were not an eternal community, it could not be said that God is love (only that He at some point began to love!)... But this infinite and eternal love between the Father, Son and Spirit always existed.

And somehow...in a way I can't understand... when God the Son took on our flesh and stood in my place... when MY sin was attributed to Him and He agreed to take my blame... He knew He could only redeem me by somehow becoming loathsome before His Father in His humanity... He would be treated as the greatest of all sinners... And when He faced the final moment in the garden, He faced the choice that Adam had faced in that first Garden, "to do the will of God or not" ...In the case of Jesus Christ, that choice meant facing the justice that I deserved...and in that moment He said, "Thy will be done... I would rather lose the face of My Father than lose the ones we love..."

It says in Psalm 40 "I said, 'Behold, I come; in the scroll of the book it is written of me. I delight to do Your will, O my God; Your Law is within my heart."

Because Jesus Christ delighted to do the will of the Father...because He lived the life I was required to live and died the death I deserved to die...that makes ME delightful in the eyes of the Father. There is no outstanding debt hanging over my head... nothing unresolved. I am declared altogether lovely and not guilty and God is happy with me...with US...with all who are in Jesus Christ by trust. That's why it makes sense when Ps. 40 says "*Many, O LORD my God, are the wonders which You have done, and Your thoughts toward us ... they would be too numerous to count*".

Now what does this mean for the contemplative life? Well, it means that wasting time with God is the most efficient use of time there could be. Jesus Christ's life shows that. He is the most influential person who ever lived...and He was a Waiter! He lifted His eyes and prayed...contemplated...trusted and waited. Our prayers are beautiful to God because of Him (*we present our prayers like bouquets of wildflowers half full of weeds and thorns and poison ivy and Jesus Christ, our older brothers weeds the bouquet before it gets to the Father*).

The contemplative life is NOT idleness or inefficiency – it's the life of faith and to refuse it is an act of unbelief and self-worship. It's unbelief and pride. And it requires practice and what Schaeffer called "active passivity"...it's anything but easy or lazy.

2nd – Take little steps this week. C.S. Lewis said he could NOT end the day properly without taking a walk outdoors with God. Get a habit like that.

Get a little notebook. You might ask, "Where do you find that in this passage?" Well, we're reading these written prayers...It's a very ancient discipline.

Recognize that we are awash in distractions and begin to identify what are the main obstacles in your life. Ask God to help you to turn off the radio or walk away from the cell phone and wait on the Lord.

3rd – These writers recognize external opposition to their spiritual development but they also see the inner impediments. In v. 12, “My iniquities have overtaken me...my sins are more numerous than the hairs on my head...my heart fails me...” So, there is an important place for repentance in this waiting process (future sermon) but also in just recognizing our constant drift toward self-importance. Both Psalms mention “the proud” – that’s US...unless we are waiting on the LORD! The final lines of 123 repeat this need for grace...grace ...grace! Seeing our need and seeing God’s love of giving grace is what kills pride.

Last, Christian spirituality is an indirect process. As we’ve been saying: we soak in grace and it gets down into our roots. The disciplines of solitude, silence, simplicity and contemplation are key to that soaking process. They’re ways of exercising faith. And faith gets the grace that Jesus Christ IS down into us...faith brings it in...brings it deeper and little by little changes not just our behavior but even the motives and drives underneath the behavior.

Here’s a more literal translation of the first lines:

“I waited, waited for the LORD; He bent down to me and was riveted on my cry; He brought me up out of a dangerous ditch, out of the mud, and He set my feet upon a rock making my progress certain. He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God; many will see and stand in awe and will trust in the LORD.”