

Strength for the Soul

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[0 : 00] So, what determines the impact that hardship has on our soul, on our faith? And the first question that this psalm would have us ask is, Is God primary in your heart?

Is God primary in your heart? Is He the first thing? Is He the main thing? Does He take priority over everything else in your heart? Over the last few months, I've actually learned a lot about myself and how I respond in the face of challenge and hardship.

For instance, when COVID first hit back in March, when we began to realize how big this thing was and how life-altering it was going to be, the first thing I did, my knee-jerk response, was to dive into the news, to dive into the internet.

And I just started voraciously reading everything I could get my hands on. And it was only after the fact, weeks later, that I realized that my first response was not to go to my knees in prayer.

My first response was to dive into the internet and to try to read as much as I possibly could. And as I've reflected about that in the subsequent weeks, I've realized that I think one of the things that I was trying to do there and one of my patterns is that when I face hardship, it makes me feel out of control.

[1 : 16] And so my knee-jerk reaction is to want to try to regain as much of a sense of control as possible. And for me, that often looks like trying to learn as much as I can and get my mind around something so that I can then feel that I'm in control again.

And so another way of saying this is what I've learned about myself is when I face hardship, my tendency is to run to the God of control, to go to the altar of control, and to put my hope in and to make that need for control primary in my life.

And that's where I go for comfort. And so just realizing that about my own heart has been tremendously helpful. And so as we talk about idols, idols are anything that we run to for that sense of comfort, right?

Idols are the things that we go to as a knee-jerk reaction when we face hardship. And so an idol is anything that we look to as a replacement for God.

Anything that we look to to give us things that only God can give us. And in Scripture, we see three ways that we can do this, three sort of categories of idolatry.

[2 : 26] First, the first category is people can take anything, any ordinary thing out of life, whether it's a thing or a person or a relationship or an idea, we can take ordinary things and turn them into idols that we worship.

So we can do this with control. We can do this with money. We can do this with politics. We can do this with success. We can do this with our kids.

We can take any ordinary thing and begin treating it like a God, making it primary in our hearts. But there's a second category that this psalm draws our attention to that merits a little bit of reflection on our parts.

In some cases, idols can actually have a real spiritual force behind them. It's not just a cognitive thing. Idols can actually have a spiritual force behind them.

David says in verse 1, Before the gods I sing your praise. He says before the gods. Now what's he talking about there? Well, there's various explanations for what he's talking about. But what we realize, if we take into account all of Scripture, is that there are several places in the Bible where Scripture seems to suggest that there are numerous supernatural beings that exist beyond our perception.

[3 : 45] That it's not just God and God alone. There are in fact all kinds of spiritual beings that exist, even though we can't perceive them. So for instance, Psalm 82 talks about God taking his place in the divine council.

That's a very mysterious reference. Job makes a similar reference as well. And then when we look in the New Testament, Paul, a very well-known passage in Ephesians, Paul says there that our

struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the spiritual rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.

So all of these would lead us to believe that there are actually spiritual beings, entities that exist and that impact human lives and impact the world in various ways.

And so we need to recognize that some of our idols actually have a spiritual force behind them. In some cases, a malevolent spiritual force behind them. I think that there's a way in which things like anger, rage and resentment, things like fear, things like lust, that these things can gain such a power over us.

They can come to dominate us so much that we recognize that there's a spiritual force driving them. So this is another thing that we need to understand about idolatry.

[5 : 02] And then the third thing that we need to recognize, or a third form of idolatry, is this happens when we think that we are worshiping the true God of Scripture. And yet, in fact, what we've done is we have refashioned that idea that we have of God into the kind of God that we would prefer to believe in, that we would prefer to worship.

And so we've actually lost sight of the true God, and we're worshiping a God of our own imagination. One of the things that we need to ask ourselves from time to time is, as I think about the God I believe in, does that God just happen to agree with me on every major issue?

So if you think about the God that you worship, does that God just happen to agree with you on every major issue? Do they share all of your social stances? Do they share your political views? Does that God just happen to kind of align with you in all of those ways? And then I would say, if that's the case, don't you think that's an odd coincidence? That the infinite God of the universe who created the cosmos just happens to line up with you on every major issue?

And if that's the case, we need to recognize that we have probably recast God in our own image rather than worshiping the God of Scripture. And the thing that we need to recognize about idols is, the problem is, idols don't often look like idols.

[6 : 24] The problem with idols is they look exactly like God, just without the parts that we don't like. And so we need to be very discerning in, when we worship God, what God are we worshiping?

Are we worshiping the true God of Scripture? And if we want a strong soul, if we want that kind of resilience in our faith, the first thing that we need to make sure of is that we're worshiping the true God rather than an idol, something that we've turned into a God or some way that we have reimagined God to fit our liking.

And so as David says in verse 2, God has exalted His name and His word above all things. And so one of the places that we go to make sure we're worshiping the God of the Bible is Scripture.

And we want to compare our idea of God with the way God has revealed His name and revealed His nature through His word. So this is the first thing that we see in this psalm and in David's life.

God was always primary. And any time that David fell into sin or rebelled against God, it was always connected to the fact that God had ceased to be primary in his heart. The second thing that we see in this psalm, the second question that we might ask is, are God's purposes the aim of your life?

[7 : 42] Are God's purposes the aim of your life? David says in verse 8, The Lord will fulfill His purpose for me. Your steadfast love, O Lord, endures forever.

And I love this. No matter what David faced, whether it was in a time of flourishing or a time of suffering, in good times and hard times, David's starting place for making sense of his life was the assumption that no matter what, God's purposes were unfolding in his life.

No matter what the circumstances may be, he knew God loves me, His steadfast love is with me, and God's purposes are unfolding in my life. And that was the foundation of how he made sense of everything else.

And what's amazing is, that was David's assumption, but David had no idea how God might use him. But we see much later in Scripture, in Acts chapter 13, Paul is preaching a sermon, and he's recounting all of the ways that God has worked throughout history.

He's recounting the story of Israel. And at one point in this sermon, in Acts chapter 13, he says, for David, after he had served the purpose of God in his own generation, fell asleep and was laid with his fathers.

[8 : 57] Isn't that fantastic? I love, it's one of my favorite places in Acts. He summarizes David's entire life with these words. He served God's purposes in his own generation.

It reminds me of people like Esther, if you know the story of Esther. You know, Esther, whom God, the most unlikely person, whom God positioned in the halls of power for such a time as this, so that she was able to be used by God to save thousands of people from being annihilated.

She served God's purposes in her own generation, and then she was laid to rest. And I gotta be honest, as I've thought about that over the years, man, I hope somebody says that about me when I die.

I hope that after I am gone that people say, you know, he served God's purposes in his own generation, and then he was laid to rest with his fathers. I hope people say that about me.

I hope they don't say he spent all of his time on his iPhone. I hope they say he served God's purposes. I can't imagine anything better for somebody to say about you after you pass away.

[10:09] And so the question that I want you to think about is, what do you hope that people say about you? After you're gone, after you're laid to rest, how would you want somebody to summarize your life?

What would you want them to say about you? And so in other words, what is the aim of your life? What are you focused on? Another way of thinking about this, or asking the question, would be to say, how do you define success in your life?

What's your definition of a life well lived? This is something really worth thinking about. Because it's easy to start going down a path in life, aiming at the things that we think that we should be aiming at, but never really taking the time to ask ourselves and to ask the Lord, what does a life well lived actually look like?

What am I actually aiming at? What does success mean? Is a successful life, does that mean being financially stable? And if so, what does that mean? How much do you need in the bank to feel financially stable?

Is a successful life, does that mean that you get married? Does it mean that you have kids? Does it mean that your kids turn out well and don't hate you too much when they grow up?

[11:19] Does it mean that you get a PhD and then you've arrived? Does it mean that you make a difference and have a lasting impact in the world, a kind of legacy? What does a successful life actually mean?

Is it just to be healthy, free from suffering, happy, content? If you had to sit down and write it out on a piece of paper, how would you answer this question? Because the thing is, all of those things that I've just described, they're all goals that are good, that people aim at, that we hope we have, but none of those things is guaranteed.

None of the things on that list are guaranteed. You might have money, you might not. You might be destitute. You might do all the right things and still be destitute. You might be healthy, you might not.

You might end up struggling with chronic pain that you never thought that you would have to deal with. You might run every day and be super healthy and eat all the right foods and get cancer. None of these things are guaranteed.

None of these things can we count on. There's only one thing, in fact, as we think about what is the aim of my life, there's only one real thing that we can aim at that is guaranteed.

[12:28] And that is, if the aim of your life is to serve God's purposes, that is absolutely guaranteed. It will happen. If you want to give yourself to God and you want to say, I want my life to be about serving your purposes, God can and will use you.

And it's a completely different way of thinking about life and it's a completely different way of defining success. If you give your life to God, just like David, just like Esther, just like Moses, just like all of these people we read about in Scripture, God can and will use you for His purposes.

And if that is your metric for success, it makes all of the difference. Because whether you're rich or poor, whether you're single or married, whether you have kids or don't have kids, whether you have a job that you love or a job that you just tolerate, whether you're healthy or you struggle with health issues all of your life, no matter what your life looks like, the one thing that you can count on, the one thing that you know for sure is that God is using everything in your life to serve His purposes. God doesn't waste any of it. It all gets wrapped into, woven into, this great unfolding tapestry of history that is God's sovereign will.

And so here's the thing that we need to wrestle with. It could be that the greatest you ever achieve in your life is middle management. It could be that that's as far as you get.

[13 : 56] You know, for those of us who are entering the kind of middle years of life, I think one of the biggest fears that many of us have, the fear is not so much a fear of failure. The fear is a fear of mediocrity.

It's a fear of only ever being okay but never really being the best at anything. It's a fear of achieving mediocrity and recognizing that's all I was able to do in my life.

And maybe that's how the world sees you. Maybe according to the world's economy and the world's metrics for success, that's how you get labeled. But let me tell you this.

If you are the kind of person who has given your life to God and aimed your life at God's purposes, when you pass away, when you are laid to rest as Scripture says, all of the hosts of heaven will sing out in praise to God as they welcome you home and they will cry out, there is one who served God's purposes in their generation.

All of the heavenly hosts will celebrate as you come home. They'll drown out the voices of the world. And of course, the greatest example of this is the cross itself.

[15 : 11] You know, when Jesus Christ allowed himself to be executed, there weren't people standing around saying, look at this example of greatness. Look at this example of success. Look at how amazing this man is. Look at what he's willing to do for the people he loves.

No, nobody said that. No, he died a common death of a common criminal executed like a traitor to the empire. And that was it.

And then everybody went home and nobody celebrated. And yet, in the eyes of heaven, as that happened on the cross, there were shouts of joy and triumph because finally, victory over sin and death had been won.

So we need to ask ourselves, whose metrics define success for us? What are we aiming at? What is our life really about? What voices am I going to listen to? What are my priorities?

And you know, I know that there is great hardship right now. I know that there's tremendous unrest. I know that COVID-19 has disrupted virtually every aspect of life.

[16 : 14] I know that there's political turmoil. I know that there's deep social animosity and division. I know all of these things are true. But there is also an opportunity here for us to completely re-examine what we are aiming at in life.

What matters? And if you want strength in your soul to be resilient and to be the kind of person that when you face hardship your trust grows, your faith grows.

If you want to be that kind of person, first make sure that God is primary in your heart and not some substitute God in His place. Put your faith and your trust in Jesus.

Exalt God's Word in your own life the way God does. And then make God's purpose the aim of your life so that no matter what circumstances you find yourself in you know He is using me even now.

If you do these things no matter what may come God will fulfill His purposes in your life. And one day when you have been laid to rest until Jesus comes again people will say of you there is someone who served God's purposes in their own generation.

[17 : 27] Let's pray. Lord we thank you and we pray that even as we reflect on these words and on your people whom we read about in Scripture we pray that this would give us the courage to re-examine our own lives and our own hearts.

That we would have a vision of life that reflects your glory and reflects your purposes and that the voices of the world and the metrics of the world would be distant and that they would fade in the light of your glory and your unfolding sovereign plan in the world.

Lord we want nothing more than to be part of that and we pray this in your Son's holy name. Amen.