

Embattling Faith in the Spiritual Night: An Exposition of Psalm 61.

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A further study in this occasional series by the Editor.

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The anatomy of darkness

There are some occasions when, though we are children of God, God seems a million miles away from us. The sense of his loving protection and care is absent, he appears deaf to our prayers and, as a consequence, we feel physically, emotionally and spiritually drained and powerless. Not infrequently, Christian saints have spoken in terms of the 'desert' or the 'night' in order to capture the sense of dryness, lostness and foreboding that such experiences bring.

Encouragement in the night:

One of the encouragements to be gained in such an agonising situation is the knowledge that we are not alone; a fact demonstrated time and again in the Psalms. This is true in the present Psalm where David expresses a sense of distance from God (verse 4), of failing to obtain a hearing (verse 1), of hopelessness (the 'rock' is beyond his reach, verse 2) and (in the same verse) that weariness which penetrates to the core of his being.

A further encouragement to be found in the present psalm is the fact that there is absolutely no evidence to suggest that the darkness through which David was passing was a result of his own sin or weakness. Although Psalm 51 is testimony to the fact that personal sin can lead to the removal of God's presence, we cannot draw the conclusion that sin is usually or even often the occasion of entering a spiritual desert. Other factors often play a part. Our circumstances, especially when the pressure we are under is ongoing, can occasion depression and, in view of the correlation of body and mind, lead to spiritual dryness. An example of this can be found in

Psalm 56 where David longs to experience 'the light of life' (verse 13) but, at present, pleads for mercy because 'all day long' (repeated in verses 2 and 5) he feels hemmed in by his problems.

Sometimes, as in the present Psalm, the faintness of heart of which the psalmists speak is as probably a reference to illness as to any other enemy. Elijah's depression was as probably the result of the strenuous endeavours of previous days which left him exhausted as prompted by any other factors (see 1 Kings 19).

Finally, temperamental factors can be significant. Pastoral experience testifies to the fact that those of melancholic temperaments (in particular) are vulnerable to mood swings and to being plunged into periods of spiritual darkness.

In this context the first part of verse 5 is important. David speaks of having made his vows to God. Admittedly, the precise significance of this phrase in the present context is not altogether clear. However, it may well be tantamount to a proclamation of innocence (see further below).

This is important! None of us is sinlessly perfect (and the psalmists never claimed such). It is always, therefore, possible to find some apparent ground for being under the judgement of God. However, it is not in the character of God to use a hammer to crack a nut. Frequently, as apparently here, the authors of the Psalms appeal to the fact that there appears to be nothing in their lives to justify the severity of the trial they are experiencing if it is seen as divine judgement. So David did not ferret around to find some forgotten and minor offence which might explain his darkness . . . and neither should we. Spiritual darkness is occasioned by a whole range of factors of which sin is only one of the possible causes.

I was once given this advice. In spiritual depression, I was told, if no obvious failing seems to have prompted

such an experience, look elsewhere for the reason. It remains sound and biblical advice!

Sound advice amid the shadows:

It is of the nature of biblical faith to encourage us to apply the lessons to be learnt from the experience of others to ourselves. This is especially true of the experiences recorded in the Bible. David, in the present psalm, took four steps to strengthen his faith in the midst of his trials; we can learn from each one of them.

Take if to the Lord in prayer

David's words in verse 1 can appear impetuous or even irrelevant! The tone of voice in which he spoke or penned the words might well have contained the implied, 'get on with it: stop turning a deaf ear to my situation and wake up and do something!'

However, such an emotional outburst can be viewed from a different perspective. It is of the nature of human intimacy that strength of feeling can be expressed without fear of being misunderstood and criticized. We can and do 'let our hair down' among friends and family and express all those deep-seated hurts or fears that we hide from others. It is in the light of this that we should understand David's works; he is telling God just how he feels because he knows that God is his friend.

In his darkness, David knew there was one to whom he could turn for compassionate understanding; one who had the resources to meet his need. Yet in such circumstances it is so easy to resort to self-help and to make God our last port of call. We ought to learn from David!

We'll praise him for all that is past.

On a dark night (a night unlit by moon, stars or other lights) and while crossing a mountain pass by car, even the headlights of the vehicle in which I was travelling seemed to penetrate the prevailing blackness only with the greatest difficulty. In the dark it is difficult to see either forward or backward and spiritual night can be the place of forgetfulness. This Psalm, however, reminds us of the importance of making the effort to recall our past experiences of God. Just as an experienced guide who has passed the way before can safely find a way through many treacherous dangers (like the old acquaintance who regularly traverses the treacherous sands and marshes of the Wash) so the same is true of the believer. God's past dealings, as David knew (verse 3) had confirmed that his God was a secure place in a storm and an impregnable defence against the enemy. God does not change. Consequently David seeking shelter and protection afresh reminded himself that God wouldn't (couldn't!) let him down. The old hymn puts this graphically.

*The soul that on Jesus has leaned for repose,
He will not, he cannot desert to his foes.
That soul, though all hell should endeavour
to shake,
'I'll never, no never, no never forsake.*

Search me, O God

As we noted above, an appeal to personal integrity (verse 5a) might appear rather odd to those of us who believe that we have been saved through faith in a gospel which declares our own utter unworthiness.

However, the oddness is more apparent than real. David is not claiming to be perfect (a man who also penned Psalm 51 would have to have a split-personality to do so!) He is, however, appealing to one of two things. He may be arguing that, if this is punishment, it scarcely fits the crime. Alternatively, it may be that he is arguing that God does 'owe him one' in the light of his expressed desire to honour God. Thus, without crudely suggesting that every favour deserves its reward, he might (not unreasonably before a just God) be pleading the case of his 'service'.

This suggests that there is a place, especially in the darkness, to secure our footing by pleading our record and desires for God.

And Trust Him for All that's to Come.

In verses 5b-7 David looks forward. He had been given some wonderful promises by God (2 Samuel 7 may well be in mind here) and, by faith, he seeks to build upon them in his present distress.

Of course the promises that God has given to us do not include an everlasting dynasty! However, David's example is one we ought to follow. . . and we have a greatly enlarged Bible over his! This Bible is full of promises that are given to true believers to encourage and stimulate faith. A steady 'slog' through the Bible with a marker pen which can highlight these promises can be a great help to the embattled believer.

Hazard warning!

David's confidence did rise to the point where he could pen the words in verse 8. However, the darkness is not past until and beyond this moment faith might need to continue to wrestle with the darkness. Impatience at God's slowness to act (verse 1), the sense of being overwhelmed (verse 2), the experience of almost despairing of deliverance (verse 4) still characterize the way.

The Bible is a wonderfully realistic book! It recognizes that faith is trust in the unseen, not the unfettered view of that which can be apprehended. By its very nature faith has to live with doubt, fear and darkness; the glimpses of glory are but glimpses!

At its best Christianity has always recognized this and affirmed that an unchallenged faith which knows nothing of uncertainty and the desert is no faith at all. It has grasped that there are two types of darkness; the darkness of absence and the darkness created by the shadow of that which is near. It is this latter darkness of which this Psalm speaks: a darkness which the greatest saints have grasped is the mark of spiritual maturity rather than of weak faith.

In the footsteps of the master:

There is a Messianic element to this psalm which must not be missed. Ultimately the promises of verses 5b-7 found their fulfilment in Jesus and he himself, as 'great David's greater son', experienced the unfathomable

darkness of Gethsemane and Golgotha that only the sinless Son of God who had enjoyed the unfettered intimacy of the Trinity from eternity past could experience.

Thus, if David and Jesus found their trials such that they were nearly overwhelmed we can gain encouragement from the fact that our experiences are not unique and that despite the battle they both found toe-holds in their darkness which enabled them (and will enable us) to secure their footing until the storms subsided. Gerhard Tersteegen had understood this. He said:

*Jesus still lead on
Till our rest be won
And although the way be cheerless
We will follow, calm and fearless.
Guide us by your hand
To our Fatherland.*

Adam and Christ (Romans 5:12-21)

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The second half of chapter 5 marks a new point of departure in Paul's thinking. In some ways, of course, this change has been implicit all along, since chapter 1 begins with the creation of the world, and the problem of human sin is the major theme of the first four chapters of the epistle. Yet it is interesting to note that although the story of Adam lies behind everything which has been said so far, Paul does not specifically mention it until we reach this point, where he is particularly concerned to explain the work of Christ to us. The close association, amounting to parallelism, between Adam and Christ is one of the hallmarks of Paul's theology. He was always concerned to get back to the root of things, to examine the ultimate cause, or first principle of the situation in which we now find ourselves. The new life given to us in Christ is such a radical departure from what has gone before that it can be properly understood only by going straight back to Adam. Christ's work of salvation reaches back beyond the framework of God's covenant with Israel, important though that is, to the very roots of human existence. Here is the ultimate reason why Christ's work extends to the salvation of

the Gentiles as well as the Jews, because we are all united, on the same basis, in our common descent from the first man.

Original sin?

Verse 12 has been the subject of considerable controversy down through the centuries, and it would not be too much to say that the major differences which exist among Christians concerning the fundamental question of original sin stem ultimately from the way in which this verse has been understood. For this reason, we need to look at it very carefully, and examine the development of Paul's thought in the light of his argument as a whole. First of all, it is clear that Paul builds a logical sequence from the disobedience of one man to the spread of sin in the world, and from there to the appearance of death, which is coterminous with the extent of sin. The question is then whether the spread of death results from the fact that all have sinned, or whether the spread of death has produced a situation in which all men have subsequently sinned. In other