

RAVENS AND LILIES

Exodus 14:10-14

¹⁰ As Pharaoh approached, the Israelites looked up, and there were the Egyptians, marching after them. They were terrified and cried out to the LORD. ¹¹ They said to Moses, “Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us to the desert to die? What have you done to us by bringing us out of Egypt? ¹² Didn’t we say to you in Egypt, ‘Leave us alone; let us serve the Egyptians’? It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert!”

¹³ Moses answered the people, “Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the LORD will bring you today. The Egyptians you see today you will never see again. ¹⁴ The LORD will fight for you; you need only to be still.”

Matthew 6:25-34 Do Not Worry

²⁵ “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? ²⁶ Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? ²⁷ Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?

²⁸ “And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. ²⁹ Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. ³⁰ If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? ³¹ So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ ³² For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. ³³ But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. ³⁴ Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.

There are few things we admire more than the self-made man. Or woman. One of the most popular authors in American history was a man named Horatio Alger, who wrote dime novels back in the 19th Century about men who started out at the bottom of the barrel and worked their way up through “luck, pluck and virtue.” Rags to riches. Log cabin to the White House. It’s the All-American story and our love for it is reflected in our popular sayings. *“Pull yourself up by your own bootstraps!”* *“When the going gets tough the tough get going.”* *“The Lord helps those who help themselves.”* (Some people think that’s from the Bible but it’s not.) Ambition, determination and grit—that’s what it takes to live the American dream in an

upwardly mobile, classless society. We treasure that narrative and we're willing to defend it with our lives.

To people like us with the cultural "ears" that we have, today's Scripture passages might sound a little strange. There's absolutely nothing in them about hard work or perseverance or self-improvement. Quite the opposite: they describe us as passive recipients of God's blessings. In the *Old Testament* verses from *Exodus*, Moses instructs the Israelites: *"God will fight for you, you need only to be still."* (*Exodus 14:14*) Through the Psalmist, God says, *"Be still, and know that I am God."* (*Psalm 46:10*) In the passage from the *Sermon on the Mount*, not only are we advised to do nothing; we are urged to stop doing the thing we do the most of, and that, of course, is to worry. *"Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body what you will wear."* In fact, don't worry about tomorrow at all. Instead, be like *"the ravens of the air"* that *"do not sow or reap or store away in barns,"* and like *"the lilies of the field"* that *"neither toil nor spin"* and depend entirely upon God to supply all of your needs. *"Do not worry, saying 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness and all these things will be **given** to you as well."* (*Matt. 6:25-34*)

When I first read these verses and tried to imagine applying them to my life, I had a hard time with them. Maybe I could identify a little with the ravens: at least they fly around looking for food. But lilies of the field? Plants are completely passive—not to mention brainless. I couldn't identify with that—even though my wife thought it shouldn't pose much of a problem for me to do so. I guess that considering some of the decisions I've made in my life—or failed to make—maybe I should have taken them a little more to heart. But seriously: be like a plant? It's a little hard to swallow. Maybe you have the same problem with it.

But why? Why do we resist this analogy? Doesn't the answer lie in one little word: pride? We really, *really* want to believe that we can take care of ourselves and the idea that we are utterly dependent upon God for all we have is repellent. Beggars may have to depend on God or the kindness of strangers for what they eat and drink and wear, but we can take care of ourselves, thank you very much. The thought that we are beggars is obnoxious to us. Yet the Bible tells us that that is exactly what we are in our relationship with God. Not high achievers, not low achievers - not any kind of achiever - just beggars.

If we were to measure a man in terms of his achievements, Martin Luther would be a good candidate for the high achiever of all time. He wrote over one hundred books, translated the entire Bible into German, pastored a church and served as spiritual advisor to a prince. On top of that, he led the reformation of the church and in the process, defied the two most powerful men in the world—the Pope and the Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire. For his efforts he was put under the imperial ban and lived the last half of his life under the death sentence. And Luther accomplished all this while suffering from what nowadays would be called "clinical depression"—a condition so severe that he confessed that some days he could

not even get out of bed. He was a remarkably strong and courageous man, yet he took no credit for himself and gave all glory to God and the power of God's Word. The last words he spoke before he died were: *"We are all beggars; that's for sure."* All that we have and can expect to have comes from God and from Him alone. We have nothing—repeat, *nothing*—to do with it.

Oh but we work for a living, don't we? Sure we do. But who gave us the work to do and the brains and hands to do it with? Did we create our jobs out of nothing? Did we create ourselves? No. The Same One who gives us the things that proceed from our labor—our food and clothing and shelter—gave us the work we do and the ability to do it. Remember: after God created Adam He placed him in the Garden of Eden to work it and to tend it. Did Adam create the garden—or the fruit that he ate or the seeds that he planted? No. They came from the One who created him and gave him the work to do.

And so it is with us. God supplies us with food and water and seed; we supply the eating and drinking and planting. *We serve Him by letting Him serve us.* Our model is Jesus Who said: *"...whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."* (Matt. 20:26-28) "

There are only two things we can give God: *praise and thanksgiving*. Praise is what we give God for Who He is; thanksgiving is for what he has done for us. When we give all glory to God, we are simply giving credit where it is due. God is not increased by our thanks and praise, **but we are** because **praise and thanksgiving are the more powerful antidotes to pride**. When we give all glory to God, His light shines into us and our pride evaporates. Then He shines his light through us into the world, as Jesus said, *"...let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven."* (Matt. 5:14-16) When we give all glory to God, we are merely acknowledging the fact that God is the author and perfecter of all good things, including our faith, our prayers and our praises. But most important of all, when we give God glory instead of ourselves, the foundations of our pride begin to crumble.

The Scriptures literally overflow with the praise of God. We are urged to praise Him four hundred and twenty-two times—two hundred and twenty-seven times in the *Psalms* alone. The last Psalm—*Psalm 150*—urges us to praise God in every single verse and concludes: *"Let everything that has breath praise the Lord! Praise the Lord!"* (Psalm 150:6) And that's during our life on earth! From what the Bible tells us about heaven, we will be praising God continually into eternity. Now some Christians say, *"Wait a minute--just how long can you praise anyone or anything and really mean it? I mean, if that's all that heaven is about—won't it be boring? Why does God need all this praise anyway?"* Well, God doesn't need it, but we need to give it because it's the one thing that vanquishes our pride. Pride is arguably the original sin of mankind. When Satan lied to Eve, telling her than God didn't mean it when He said, *"...for when you eat of it you will surely die,"* and that if she partook of the fruit, *"...your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God,*

knowing good and evil”—he planted the seed of pride in her—a seed which immediately produced the fruit of rebellion. And still does in us. Pride comes in many different forms—not all of them obvious. The derelict who has lost everything—or maybe never had anything to begin with—do you think he blames himself for his miserable condition? Chances are he blames everyone BUT himself—his parents, the people who walk past him on the street, the government for not taking care of him, his former friends who have deserted him. We have a remarkable ability to pin the blame for our troubles on everything and everyone other than ourselves. And that, my friends, is driven as much by pride as the successful person’s desire for other people’s admiration. Solomon was blessed as a child with more wisdom than any man before him or since and he expressed his thanksgiving by building a great temple dedicated to the glory and praise of God. So far so good. But then Solomon became infected with pride. He built a palace for himself that was larger and more opulent than the temple he had built for God. To enlarge his empire by entering into treaties with pagan nations, he took pagan women as wives and allowed them to foster pagan religion in Israel. As he glorified himself more and more he glorified God less and less and at the end, sank into something like a depression. Seeming to realize where he had gone astray, he wrote: *“Vanity of vanities, saith the teacher, vanity of vanities: all is vanity!”* (Eccl. 1:2)

John Calvin once said that man was created for one purpose and one purpose only, and that was to praise and glorify God. For once, Calvin had it right! When we praise God in all circumstances, we are doing what we were created to do. As Paul wrote in *Philippians*: *“Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, **with thanksgiving**, take your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”*

When we fill our thoughts and words and prayers with praise and thanksgiving, our pride withers like an unwelcome weed in the garden and our faith grows and blossoms like the flowering of a lily. You can’t feel it or see it grow any more than you can see a lily grow, but one day the full flower will be there. Then you will be able to see clearly that God IS the alpha and omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end of all good things.

Praise the Lord! Amen.