

Walking In The Land Of The Living

A Meditation on Psalm 116

Many of the Psalms of the Old Testament are the personal reflections of people whom God has brought low and then raised up again.

As such, they are paradigms or models of the Christian life.

It's not so much that they show us HOW to live as that they show us what to expect out of a life lived in faith.

Today's Psalm, *Psalm 116*, is a good example.

The first thing we learn from *Psalm 116* is that a life lived in faith involves DYING and BEING REBORN.

Listen to verses 1-6:

"I love the Lord, for He heard my voice; he heard my cry for mercy Because he turned his ear to me, I will call on him as long as I live. The cords of death entangled me, the anguish of the grave came over me; I was overcome by trouble and sorrow."

Every human being is born spiritually dead.

Paul wrote, "*You were dead in your transgressions and sins....*" and David said it even more vividly: "*...I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.*"

When we are born, we are born spiritually dead and we have to be REBORN in order to come to LIFE.

As Jesus said to Nicodemus: "*You must be born again of water and the Spirit.*"

After we are reborn, our Christian life is characterized by conflict, because those who are born again of water and the Spirit are born into warfare.

As Christ said: "*I did not come to bring peace, but a sword, for I have come to turn a man against his father, a daughter against her mother...a man's enemies will be the members of his own household.*"

Not only is a Christian at war with *world*, he is at war with *himself*.

The word of God is, *"...sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart."*

So a man has three enemies: the fallen world, his own sinful flesh and the devil.

Listen to Paul describe the battle that raged within him: *"I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do, I do not do, but what I hate, I do...I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out...the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing...What a wretched man I am!"*

Living in the midst of warfare, the born-again Christian experiences many mini-deaths and mini-resurrections.

Each time he dies, the Lord raises him up to new life.

Listen again to the Psalm:

Then I called on the name of the Lord; 'O Lord, save me!' The Lord is gracious and righteous; our God is full of compassion. The Lord protects the simplehearted, when I was in great need, he saved me. The Lord protects the simplehearted; when I was in great need, he saved me. Be at rest once more, O my soul, for the Lord has been good to you. For you, O Lord, have delivered my soul from death, my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling, that I may walk before the Lord in the land of the living."

All we have to do is CALL UPON THE NAME OF THE LORD.

God will do everything else.

As he did Lazarus, he will raise us up to new life and send us forth to, *"...walk before the Lord in the land of the living."*

What is the land of the living?

It is a land where continual showers of God's grace bring forth new life.

But there is also a dimension to Christian living in THIS world which the contemporary Church all too often sweeps under the rug for fear of turning off potential converts before they can be turned on, or, for that matter, fear of turning off current members.

WALKING IN THE LAND OF THE LIVING INVOLVES SUFFERING.

Not only is the believer at war with himself and the unbelieving world; he bears the name of Christ which carries with it the cross, the cup of suffering.

Listen to the Psalmist:

"I believed; therefore I said, 'I am greatly afflicted.'

The Christian sees with clearer vision than the unbeliever because the Holy Spirit has opened his eyes to reality.

He sees the world more clearly for what it is and what it is is ugly because it is a fallen world.

IF you want to know just how ugly this world really is, read the *Book of Ecclesiastes*.

Ecclesiastes was written by Solomon the son of David and the King of Israel.

When Solomon inherited the throne at a very young age, God promised to give him wisdom to govern.

But not worldly wisdom, which is knowledge of how the world works, but Godly wisdom which is knowledge of truth that comes only from God, and can be received only through faith in God.

For a time Solomon had that faith and that knowledge, but he came to be drawn to the pursuit of worldly glories and abandoned his faith in God.

And when he lost his faith in God he lost knowledge of the truth that God alone could give him.

He was left with only knowledge of this world.

And that knowledge showed him what this fallen world really was: a vale of tears.

Listen to his words: "Meaningless! Meaningless! Everything is meaningless,,,all things are wearisome...a chasing after the wind..nothing is new under the sun."

“For with much wisdom comes much sorrow; the more knowledge, the more grief.”

Solomon was left in a bleak world with no faith in God.

But the man with faith in Christ has knowledge of heavenly truth, truth which shows him that there is another world than this one, a world where there is eternal life and eternal joy.

And the Christian is commissioned to carry the message of that eternal life and eternal joy out into a fallen world.

And if he is true to his commission, he will suffer, just as Christ suffered.

Paul wrote: *“For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.”*

And as Jesus said, *“If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.”*

From the travails of Abraham to the travails of Paul, the character of God's people is formed through suffering.

God says to Ananias concerning Paul: *“I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.”*

Ambassadors of Christ are guerilla warriors who are called to be salt and light in this world—not couch potatoes who spend their lives rearranging furniture to suit their pleasure.

God isn't interested in making us comfortable; he wants His people to grow through their suffering.

I'd like to tell you about the experience one of the members of the church I used to serve had with suffering, and how it increased her faith.

Anita had experienced a violent, negative reaction to some whitening strips she used on her teeth.

She developed intense pain and sensitivity in her mouth to the point where she could not even eat bread without it setting off a painful reaction.

No dentist or doctor was able to do anything for her.

The company that made the whitening strips would not even return her calls or respond to her letters.

Her teeth felt like raw, exposed nerves that were continually throbbing.

Anita experienced some dark days when it seemed that she would have to live with chronic, intense pain for the rest of her life.

But she and her friends in the church continued to pray day after day, week after week and month after month for Lord to heal her and take away her pain.

It took four years, but the pain slowly subsided and finally went away.

When the pain was finally gone, Anita wrote me a letter.

This is what she said: *"I no longer feel like I have a live electrical wire in my mouth and vibrating teeth; God has graciously healed me of the worst of my symptoms.... I wanted to share with you a passage God showed me earlier this month, when I was doing a Bible study entitled **"Lord, Where Are You When Bad Things Happen?"***

It's from the prophet Habakkuk:

'Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Savior. The sovereign Lord is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, he enables me to go on the heights.

It is obvious that Habakkuk has learned the lesson of faith—to trust in God's providence regardless of circumstances.

God wanted me to learn this valuable—yet extremely painful, discouraging and frustrating—lesson as well."

Anita went through a mini-hell, a four-year death, but she emerged with a deeper and stronger faith than she had before her suffering.

There is a technique used by Basque shepherders to cure a sheep who consistently wanders away from the flock.

The shepherd will break the wandering lamb's leg and then nurse it back to health.

In the process of healing, the sheep learns to love and trust the shepherd and to depend upon him for care and protection.

So, it would appear, does our divine Shepherd sometimes deal with us.

In the *Book of Job*, we read: "...do not despise the discipline of the Almighty. For he wounds, but he also binds up; he injures, but his hands also heal."

Or, in the words of Hosea the prophet: "Come, let us return to the Lord. He has torn us to pieces, but he will heal us."

Christian life is about more than being "tuned up."

It's about more than being overhauled.

It's about more than being rebuilt.

Christian life is about dying and being reborn, time and time again.

That is why the Psalmist writes; "*Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints.*"

To God, our little deaths and resurrections are passages to a true and deeper faith.

We have to descend into the anguish of the grave so that we can be raised up to walk in the land of the living.

Psalm 116 concludes: "I will sacrifice a thank offering to you and call on the name of the Lord; I will fulfill my vows to the Lord in the presence of all his people, in the courts of the house of the Lord—in your midst, O Jerusalem.

Praise the Lord!"

Amen.