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Martin Luther on the Book of Psalms.

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The Holy Spirit's Bible.

This is something that Martin Luther wrote in his introduction to the Psalms:

I have a notion that the Holy Spirit wanted to take the trouble himself to compile a short Bible and book of examples of all things Christian.

The Psalms are famous for expressing the entire spectrum of human feelings.

There are joyful hymns of praise that celebrate the faithfulness of God. There are Psalms that declare wonder at God choosing humans to carry out his goals in this world. There are compelling Psalms where the author lays his worries and his desperate need for help before God. In other Psalms the author expresses unwavering trust in God, despite trying times. Some Psalms plead for justice for the oppressed. There are Psalms of thanksgiving for those who have survived a physical or spiritual crisis. There are Psalms of deep wisdom to future generations. From both a practical and a spiritual perspective, all the lessons that we learn in the Old and New Testaments are contained in the Psalms.

I was inspired to write this message after meeting with a patient who had requested a Bible. That's all she wanted: she asked a nurse to have a chaplain bring a Bible to her room. I looked around the chaplains' office and all I could find was a New Testament and Psalms, not an entire Bible. I went to her room and apologetically told her that this was all I had. She smiled, reached out for the New Testament and Psalms volume and told me that this was just great. She said that she always needed a lot of background information to understand the history books of the Old Testament, or the works of the Prophets, or the Pentateuch. The Psalms, she said, were easy to read and always inspired her, and she could find something relevant to read no matter what her feelings or her immediate needs. We talked about the fact that there are a lot of subtle historical references in the Psalms, and it can be difficult to appreciate them without some background study. But indeed, usually, a Psalm can be deeply meaningful without any historical or theological study. Then she made a request of me, and I will get back to that later.

An important thing to remember about the Psalms is that it is in truth a book of song lyrics. We don't have any original "sheet music" or even approximate melodies for the Psalms as they were sung by the Israelites. But the Hebrew Bible tradition is an oral tradition, and the Psalms, since they are such

beautiful poetry, were an integral part of Israelite and then Jewish worship. They used pipes, reeds, percussion instruments, and string instruments to accompany the words. The lyrics, the poems were memorized as a form of religious training. They were repeated during all aspects of Israelite life, and not just during Temple or synagogue services. They were passed from generation to generation as a core part of their social fabric. It is believed that many or most of them were handed down for many centuries before being put in written form. King David is a central figure in many of the Psalms, and a number of them are attributed to him, but we do not know if he personally wrote a single Psalm. The Psalms were collected in their current form around 300 B.C.

Recently, Wendy and I went to the YMCA Camp of the Rockies. There is a short uphill hike you can take to a place called Bible Point, where there is an overlook down to a valley below. There is a mailbox at this point where you are encouraged to add prayers to a notebook that is in the mailbox. Along the trail, starting at its beginning and continuing all the way up to the mailbox and the breathtaking view, there are a series of signs with Psalm quotes on them. The general theme of these verses is nature, as you might expect. I would like to share a few of them with you – and then talk about the meaningfulness of the Psalms as a whole.

The very first sign, at the foot of the trail contains Psalm 24:1:

- ¹ *The earth is the LORD's and all that is in it,
the world, and those who live in it.*

Psalm 24 is frequently quoted in modern times and has been incorporated in multiple modern hymns (modern in the sense of from the 1600's onward). It expresses a powerful metaphor of ancient doors opening for God to enter and come to us. It is a hymn of praise. The first verse grounds the entire hymn in a powerful belief that we as Christians hold dear: the world and its lifeforms are a vast, beautiful creation – and God owns absolutely all of it.

The next sign on the upward trail contains Psalm 65:6-13:

- ⁶ *By your strength you established the mountains;
you are girded with might.*
- ⁷ *You silence the roaring of the seas,
the roaring of their waves,
the tumult of the peoples.*
- ⁸ *Those who live at earth's farthest bounds are awed by your signs;
you make the gateways of the morning and the evening shout for joy.*
- ⁹ *You visit the earth and water it,
you greatly enrich it;
the river of God is full of water;
you provide the people with grain,
for so you have prepared it.*
- ¹⁰ *You water its furrows abundantly,
settling its ridges,
softening it with showers,
and blessing its growth.*
- ¹¹ *You crown the year with your bounty;
your wagon tracks overflow with richness.*

¹² *The pastures of the wilderness overflow,
the hills gird themselves with joy,*
¹³ *the meadows clothe themselves with flocks,
the valleys deck themselves with grain,
they shout and sing together for joy.*

This is a Psalm of thanksgiving. It celebrates God for creating a world with such beautiful order. Remember that the Israelites lived in the desert. They were largely subsistence farmers. They had essentially no medical system and no welfare programs. They were constantly being invaded by brutal, powerful empires. And yet, despite living lives that were far, far more precarious than ours, they gave thanks for the incredible world that God gave them as a home.

It's believed that each year, there was a festival in the great Temple that celebrated the "*enthronement of the Lord*", and that it celebrated God's victory over the chaotic forces of the cosmos. At this time, the people envision God ascending his throne and taking command of the world. The fourth sign on the Bible Point trail contains Psalms 96:11-13, and we believe this Psalm was written explicitly for this festival. These are the last verses of the Psalm:

¹¹ *Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice;
let the sea roar, and all that fills it;*
¹² *let the field exult, and everything in it.*
Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy
¹³ *before the LORD; for he is coming,
for he is coming to judge the earth.*
He will judge the world with righteousness,

and the peoples with his truth.

Notice that the very end of this Psalm that expresses the joy humanity feels at God taking command of the world is an explicit statement that along with this comes God's right and God's duty to judge all people with equal justice and with nothing being hidden from the view of God.

The sixth sign contains all of the short Psalm 121:

- ¹ *I lift up my eyes to the hills—
from where will my help come?*
- ² *My help comes from the LORD,
who made heaven and earth.*
- ³ *He will not let your foot be moved;
he who keeps you will not slumber.*
- ⁴ *He who keeps Israel
will neither slumber nor sleep.*
- ⁵ *The LORD is your keeper;
the LORD is your shade at your right hand.*
- ⁶ *The sun shall not strike you by day,
nor the moon by night.*
- ⁷ *The LORD will keep you from all evil;
he will keep your life.*
- ⁸ *The LORD will keep
your going out and your coming in
from this time on and forevermore.*

Among Christians, this is one of the most beloved Psalms. There are a couple key elements in this Psalm. First, the hill country was a place of safety from attack, and where they could seek cool temperatures and spiritual renewal.

But the faithful always need God's help in life. Just as the hills provide shade from the broiling sun, God gives us cover from evil.

Verses 3 to 5, from the middle of Psalm 8, are on sign number seven:

- ³ *When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars that you have established;*
⁴ *what are human beings that you are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them?*
⁵ *Yet you have made them a little lower than God,
and crowned them with glory and honor.*

This is a hymn celebrating creation. These verses focus on God creating us to care for us. The last verse states something that we as Christians find almost astonishing. Despite our fragility and our moral imperfections, God has made us in his image and placed us just below God in the order of the universe. This is according to the NRSV, that is. In truth, verse 5, in the original Hebrew does not say "God". The verse references "angels" and more accurately reads as:

Yet you have made them a little lower than the angels.

Well, if we're just below the angels, then that's good enough.

The eighth sign contains Psalm 147:7-11:

- ⁷ *Sing to the LORD with thanksgiving;
make melody to our God on the lyre.*
⁸ *He covers the heavens with clouds,
prepares rain for the earth,
makes grass grow on the hills.*
⁹ *He gives to the animals their food,*

- and to the young ravens when they cry.*
- ¹⁰ *His delight is not in the strength of the horse,
nor his pleasure in the speed of a runner;*
- ¹¹ *but the LORD takes pleasure in those who fear him,
in those who hope in his steadfast love.*

Psalm 147 is the second what are call the five “Hallelujah” Psalms. They form the last five Psalms of the Book. “Hallelujah” in Hebrew translates roughly to “*Praise God*”. They honor God for the special relationship God has established with the People of God. Notice the reference to singing and playing the lyre. God protects all life. Most importantly, God does not care about “*the speed of a runner*”; rather, he only cares if we hold him in awe and ask for his love.

The eleventh and last Psalm fragment on the trail to Bible Point consists of the first half - seven verses - of Psalm 95:

- ¹ *O come, let us sing to the LORD;
let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!*
- ² *Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving;
let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise!*
- ³ *For the LORD is a great God,
and a great King above all gods.*
- ⁴ *In his hand are the depths of the earth;
the heights of the mountains are his also.*
- ⁵ *The sea is his, for he made it,
and the dry land, which his hands have formed.*
- ⁶ *O come, let us worship and bow down,
let us kneel before the LORD, our Maker!*
- ⁷ *For he is our God,
and we are the people of his pasture,
and the sheep of his hand.*

This is an intriguing Psalm. The first part, like so many of the verses on the trail up to Bible Point at the YMCA Camp of the Rockies, expresses praise in God's creations. But I'd like to focus on the shorter, second part of the Psalm, which contains an oracle. Here are verses 8 to 11 of Psalm 95:

O that today you would listen to his voice!
⁸ *Do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah,*
as on the day at Massah in the wilderness,
⁹ *when your ancestors tested me,*
and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work.
¹⁰ *For forty years I loathed that generation*
and said, "They are a people whose hearts go astray,
and they do not regard my ways."
¹¹ *Therefore in my anger I swore,*
"They shall not enter my rest."

It warns the Israelites – and us – that they must not behave like their ancestors when they were wandering in the desert for 40 years and lost track of God and their faith practices. These verses reference Meribah and Massah and reference an incident that is described in the Book of Exodus. Despite God causing water to spring miraculously from dry rocks, God's people rebel against him. This is a key reason why the generation who entered the desert from Egypt did not enter the Promised Land; only their ancestors did. So, the last sign, just before the peak of the climb, presents an irony. It starts out celebrating God as our protective shepherd and his magnificent presence on our Earth, but it ends

with a warning that we tend to repeatedly disregard all that has been given to us and turn against God.

So, in sum, the selection of signs on the trail up to a gorgeous view of God's mountains have a powerful theme in them. God created all that exists as a home for us, and it is an unbelievably beautiful world that provides us with all that we need. God will come to us when we are in need. We can turn to him when we are in trouble physically or spiritually. In return, God only wants us to love him, to have trust in him, and live in a moral, ethical way. God does not judge us by our worldly accomplishments, only by our faith. But God does judge and God does punish if that is the best way to bring us back to him.

What about the woman who asked for a Bible, and all I could find for her was a thin volume containing the New Testament and the Psalms – because the chaplains had handed out our entire supply of full Bibles. She was joyous. Those Psalms are poetic, full of emotion, and they are the heart of Christian prayer. We are used to them not rhyming in English, like our poetry and our songs. But she reminded me, they do not rhyme in Hebrew either. Rather than delivering a superficial rhythm of sounds, they give us a meaningful rhythm of ideas, of visualizations. Hebrew is a vivid language, relying on immediate and powerful imagery. It is direct and naturally poetic, but not in a rhyming sense. This

woman, who had been riding a bicycle and was dragged by a car, suffering a back injury, orthopedic injuries, and severe road rash, smiled as she opened the book of Psalms. She said that she had found a beautiful recording of Psalm 23 on YouTube, sung by Phil Wickham and Tiffany Hudson. This is the extremely famous Psalm about lying down in green pastures and the goodness and mercy of God following us all the days of our lives. She asked me if I would sit down and listen to it with her on her phone. I of course did.