

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Comments from Book 1 of the Psalms: Psalm 16

Amongst the pop-songs current in my youth was one sung by an American called Frankie Laine. The mention of his name will date my teenage years back to the fifties, which some consider to have been a golden era. The song I particularly remember contained the lines, and I hope I quote correctly.

*"I'm going to live until I die,
I'm going to laugh until I cry,
I'm going to raise the town and turn it upside down,
I'm going to live, live, live until I die."*

If I haven't quite got the words right please don't ring in. Be grateful I didn't try to sing it! In any case it's not the words themselves so much as the main idea or sentiment of the song that I'm concerned with this morning. The verse quoted obviously gives the impression of a person, possibly young, who desires to get the best from life, in other words, to live life to the full. We all of us, young or old, want to experience the very best that life can offer, to really live and not just exist. I want to look at a part of the Bible that promises just this.

To many living in England today, it might seem strange to hear that the Bible is full of indicators to a full life. It would possibly be the last place that some people would look to find the path to life yet, it is a fact that many still value the Bible and acknowledge it to be the word of God.

Psalm 16, which we are considering this morning, clearly shows that life is to be enjoyed by the believer. The last verse states that, "Thou wilt show me the path of life."

That this statement has deeper implications will be discussed later. It's enough to say now that this Psalm speaks of a quality of life and fullness of joy so very different from that indicated in Frankie Laine's song.

All of this has been said as background to our study. As we look at this today, I hope that we will be left with the sense that God wants His children to enjoy a quality of life that cannot be matched. Psalm 16 is the expression of a person who constantly trusts in the Lord, whose words pour out of the experience of faith. God's goodness and care are the cause of rejoicing and a further spur to continued trust.

We should notice that this Psalm begins with the prayer, "Preserve me, O God". Man's experience with God must include prayer, yet in these days we, as believers, are in danger of losing the habit of personal prayer. Some may no longer feel the need to talk to God. If this is the case, we should heed the warning that things are wrong in our spiritual life.

The Psalms demonstrate that prayer is the native air of the believer. For many of us, like the erring son of Luke 15, we only pray when we have reached the end of our natural material resources.

Verse 2 shows us part of the secret of this confidence in God. The Psalmist had a personal faith and relationship in the living God. The cry, "Thou art my Lord", rings out with great assurance. What was true for the Psalmist has to be true for us if we want to experience the same glad confidence. There has to be a living link between God and us - an acceptance of a relationship in which we acknowledge God as our Lord.

That this is a possibility is a miracle of grace. It is hinted in verse 2 that we have nothing which would merit such a relationship. It is bonded in the greatness of God's love. The apostle Paul in 2 Timothy 1:9 writes about the God "Who hath saved us, and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace, which was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began." It is true in any age that the relationship between God and His people is based upon God's redeeming love and on His gracious terms.

Verses 3 and 4 provide us with a contrast between the saints and those who follow other gods. Who are these saints whom the Psalmist mentions in verse 3? He obviously respects them, wishing to be in their company. It seems to me that these are the people of God, the community of the Faithful. The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews speaks about

faithful witnesses to the Lord during the whole of the Old Testament period. He sums up his list in chapter 11 with a comment about the faithful, which we can read in verse 38, "Of whom the world was not worthy". I would suggest that such passages help us to identify the saints and to understand why the Psalmist found his delight in them.

The contrast with the saints is seen in verse 4 where scorn is poured upon those who don't share his faith in the living God and who would rather call upon other names. Mention here of other gods does not demonstrate the validity of such deities. To the writer of Psalm 16 these were false gods, lifeless idols that required idolatrous worship. Separation from such practices was the order of the day. There are many man-made idols around us today. We need to follow the example of the Psalmist in his desire to be true to the living God and to separate from all evil and false worship.

To summarise our conclusions from the first four verses, we notice that the believer has a relationship with God, who is the sole object of faith, where he, the believer, takes pleasure in the company of God's people and where he keeps clear of false gods and idolatrous practices.

We now move on to the next four verses which set out for us what God has given to the faithful for their present enjoyment. Verse 5 talks of portion, cup and lot which all suggest the conquest and settlement of Canaan. They are, therefore, symbols of God's faithfulness to His people in a past age.

Another Psalm, the well loved Psalm 23:5 states, "Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of my enemies; thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over."

The lot mentioned in Psalm 16:5 along with lines and pleasant places in verse 6 would primarily refer to that particular part of the Promised Land that had been assigned to the Psalmist's family. It was important to the Israelite of old that the piece of land peculiar to him should remain his inheritance forever. The last verse of Daniel's prophecy, chapter 12 indicates this, "But go thou thy way till the end be; for thou shalt rest, and stand in thy lot at the end of the days."

We can take the same attitude and value with respect those blessings that have come to us as part of our inheritance in Christ. Do we appreciate those spiritual resources that are laid out for our enrichment in the New Testament? If we never read the epistles, we shall never know of the many blessings that are ours in Christ Jesus.

We should also notice in verse 5 that it is not only the blessings of the Lord which gladden the heart of the Psalmist, but rather it is the Lord Himself as he, the Psalmist states, "The LORD is the portion of mine inheritance and of my cup".

A poet of a later age caught this same aspiration when he wrote,

*"Jesus we wait for Thee,
With Thee to have our part;
What can full joy and blessing be,
But being where Thou art?"*

I used to think that the third line should read, "Where can full joy and blessing be". Thankfully, I have learned through grace, to appreciate the same truth that both the poet and the Psalmist valued. The Lord's presence is the greatest blessing that man can ever know.

The adjectives in verse 6 are worthy of consideration as well as the nouns. Pleasant and goodly are both positive, commending the type of experience to be desired. This is further confirmed by the writer of the Proverbs, when he wrote in Proverbs 10:22, "The blessing of the Lord, it maketh rich, and he addeth no sorrow with it."

This, I confidently claim, is the experience of those who follow the Lord. Not that the believer never sorrows or suffers! To state that is patently absurd, but His blessing is that which brings light, love and joy into our experience even as we go through life.

Notice please, some of the verbs in verses 7-8; bless, given, instruct, set and moved. We, similarly, need to be instructed in divine truth. Today the Spirit of God is acting through the servants whom the Lord has given to edify His body, which is the church of the living God. We, as individuals, need to be established and built up in our most holy faith just as the Psalmist was instructed of the Lord in his. Then, and only then, we shall not be moved.

We now approach the closing verses of the Psalm which exude a wonderful confidence in the presence of that which all flesh dreads. Here, the power of the living God comes to the forefront. Who else but those whose trust is in the Lord could utter such thoughts as we get in verses 9-11? The section begins with the word "therefore" which would carry us back to what we have already discussed. The writer's knowledge of and confidence in the Lord has been

unfolded during the course of the Psalm. Now as he contemplates death, there is a serene assurance that death is but a gateway into God's eternal presence.

How wonderful to know and appreciate that our relationship with God will not end with death. Not that we know much about the stage beyond death other than we shall be with Christ. Sufficient to accept, as the Psalmist accepted, that there will be joy for us in His presence and pleasures for ever more. This ought to be one of the clarion calls that the Church makes to this present age. To those who are taken up by the materialism of the world, this can be a liberating doctrine but we cannot know its power outside the redeeming love of Christ. It is not "pie in the sky when we die" but a continuity of that tranquillity, peace and joy which is the birthright of every Christian saved by grace.

These closing thoughts of the Psalm do not bring to an end our study of Psalm 16 for it has been widely interpreted to be a messianic Psalm, in other words to foretell something about the Messiah. Consequently we must end our study with a consideration of how this Psalm into the life of Jesus.

The New Testament makes it clear that Psalm 16, from the days of the Apostles was considered as having in view the appearance of the Messiah. Verses 8-11 are quoted by Peter in Acts 2:25-28 when he delivered his first sermon on the Day of Pentecost. Peter goes on to claim that the last verses of Psalm 16 anticipated the resurrection of the Lord Jesus.

In Acts 2:31, Peter cites David, as the writer of the Psalm, saying, "He seeing this before spake of the resurrection of Christ, that his soul was not left in hell, neither his flesh did see corruption." Here Peter is using Old Testament scriptures to validate his own personal testimony of the resurrection to prove that Jesus is the Messiah.

A further apostolic quotation of Psalm 16:10 is found in the Acts 13:35. This time it is Paul preaching in the synagogue at Pisidian Antioch. Again the claim is made that the "Holy One" of Psalm 16 is the Lord Jesus and thus the Messiah. It is pertinent to note that a messianic interpretation of this Psalm predates the Church. In his commentary on the Acts of the Apostles, FF Bruce argues that such an interpretation was current in Jewish tradition. Where these part company is in the identification of the Messiah. The Apostles claimed that the words of Psalm 16 were fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth.

We have discussed Peter's use of Psalm 16 in Acts 2 noting that it was clear to the apostles that the fulfilment of Psalm 16:10-211 could not be seen in David. He did not ascend to heaven nor sit at God's right hand! The verses are a sign post to the Lord Jesus. He has been exalted to the right hand of God; He and He alone. Such an understanding of the ascension and exaltation of Jesus of Nazareth was an integral part of the Apostolic preaching. It remains an integral part of our preaching today or we have departed from the truth of Holy Scripture.

If we have faith in the living, ascended Lord, we shall know the truth of His words when He said, "I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly". These words are recorded in the John 10:9-10.

Thus we can follow the Psalmist in his experience when he was shown the path of life; when he could rest in hope; when he could know the fullness of joy. If this is our life style it will be a demonstration of difference to a world typified by a lottery culture, by an over reliance upon money and wealth.

The shame is that we, as Christians, can also have money and wealth as the goal of our lives. We ought to follow the Apostle Paul's advice when he wrote the Philippians. "But my God shall supply all your need according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus". We can read these words in Philippians 4:19.

My desire is that we all will be so exercised about the matters outlined in Psalm 16 that we acknowledge the need of this extra dimension in our lives. To experience that which is beyond the material. In order to live in the spiritual realm we need the knowledge of God in our lives. Psalm 16 has outlined the possibility of increasing the richness and depth of that knowledge. It has even pointed us to the One whose birth we celebrate even as I prepare this talk. When you listen to this the hectic round of social activities which seem to define the modern Christmas will be over. For the believer there remains the presence of the indwelling Christ, the One of whom the Psalmist wrote of as overcoming death. May God grant that each of us walk with the Lord Jesus along the path to life. When we do so, we will experience a quality of life that equates with no other. The bonus is that this life, unlike the thought of the song sung by Frankie Laine with which we began this morning, has no ending!

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