

Psalms: wk 1 Gratitude OakbrookChurch.com Morgan Young June 30, 2013

Welcome to week 1 of the series: PSALMS. This will be a fun team-teach series that Eric McCoy and I will be doing. We'll get to hear Eric next week.

One of the things that the book of Psalm does is give us words, gives us a voice for all the different facets of life.

Psalms give us words that are personal. These words resonate with us. They let us know that God is in touch with what we are going through. These words remind us that our experiences aren't new. These words struggle with us, guide us, encourage us.

So today I'd like to weave you into the past couple months of my life, and from there we'll delve into a Psalm. And feel free to insert your own personal challenge into this story, maybe you're in it now--maybe it's been in your past. (principal applies to all) But here's my story:

SELAH

This was one of my very closest friends, the great George Roberts. Of all the people I know, few people led a life that illustrated the fruits of the Spirit like George. He was so kind, so gracious, that the first time I met him, I turned to Sandra a moment later and said, "Is that guy for real?"

The whole of George's life, he was healthy--healthy in physical activity and healthy in diet. He was a star athlete in high school, he worked a hard hands-on job at Chrysler and would then work out after that.

He exercised at the Y and was a serious cyclist. He'd run the Hilly Hundred in Brown County. For leisure he'd walk or enjoy an easy bike ride around town with his wife, Suzanne.

He intentionally monitored the stresses and busy-ness of life. He chose a simple life because it was less stressful and more peaceful and more enjoyable.

His family doctor told him he'd probably live to be over 100. Everyone who knew him fully expected him to live to a ripe old age.

But on May 6th, I got one of the most shocking phone calls I'd ever received. A police officer friend from high school, called me at work and told me that George had passed away in the night and asked if I could come to the house and be with his wife, Suzanne.

Five days later I officiated his funeral. To date, the hardest funeral I've done. So hard because no one saw it coming. The two words that described his family and friends: utter shock.

This was too soon.

It wasn't fair.

How could this have happened?

No one got a last goodbye.

No one got a shot at last words because to us all, this day wasn't due for a couple more decades.

The solace, if any, was that he lay in his bed as peaceful as could be.

The solace, if any, was that he lived every moment as if today were all he had and treated everyone like they were the most important person he could encounter.

But his wife, his children, his friends--all wanted more time. More please...

SELAH

This was my friend, Mike Bolinger. In 2009 he was diagnosed with terminal cancer. I will never forget the day in 2009 he called me and said in an all-business ominous tone, "I need to talk to you and Mark, this afternoon."

That day he walked into Mark's office in his lawyering suit and told us he was done. "I'm shot up. I'm toast. I'm not going to beat this thing. It's going to kill me in a matter of months, year tops. Doctor told me to get my affairs in order. I assume one of you guys will get the call to say something nice about me at my funeral."

The heaviness of that exchange cannot be conveyed in words. Hearing a man fight to keep his composure when expressing his own impending and sobering demise is something we can all do fine to live without.

But this too turned out to be unexpected. A year later, Mike was still living, and seemingly well. Another year came and went. And last summer Mike had the 3rd official "I'm Not Dead Yet" party.

And in these last four years, Mike sought God like never before and was used by God like never before. Even though he was "shot up" and terminal, a new Mike had risen from the ashes. We could all see it. The life-change was undeniable.

God healed relationships through Mike. God used Mike to share his story and share Jesus' story in ways no one else could.

Suddenly this lifetime-Kokomo-attorney found new and seemingly unknown influence. Influence throughout this area's Christian community--Mike Bolinger was giving talks on the church circuit. And his videos and he and Lynne's blog-sharing have been viewed as far away as Alaska and Russia.

But the last few weeks of his life were hard. His body was thinned and worn. This lifetime athlete's physical strength, gone.

The last fully lucid time I spent with him was his last day at Winona Lake. It was the first time he didn't greet me with, "How is Sandra? How are the kids?"

He simply said (in a manner I'd never seen before, from a body that looked more ravaged than I'd ever seen before), "Morgan, I don't know what I'm going to do. Last night was hell and I can't get comfortable no matter what I do. What should I do?"

And so two weeks ago tomorrow, I officiated his funeral--the second hardest I'd ever had to perform. And we celebrated the fact that we knew without a shadow of a doubt that Mike was in a new body in a new place reconnected with old friends and family. And we celebrated and took stock that we had been fortunate enough to see up close and personal--what were arguably, his best four years.

SELAH

And so in recent weeks I have walked closely with these two families. Two women, who both enjoyed the love of their life--the only men they ever married. On both sides, loss. But so different.

Suzanne had no notice. George was gone in the night. Lynne had four years to ready herself, for Mike's passing.

When George passed I, like everyone else, though it was horrible. A great man, gone much too soon.

But when Mike passed, we were relieved. His pain gone. No more drugs. No more sedation. A new body in a new home with old friends and family.

And I realized the irony of my two friend's widows.

They each would want for some of what the other had:

Lynne and friends prayed for less time, "Lord, bring Mike home, take him today," we prayed.

And what Suzanne wouldn't give for just one more day.

SELAH

And as I wrote Mike's funeral, I realized that whatever lot we have in life, there is always some level of regret. We would want whatever difficult hand we're dealt to be somewhat different.

When we think of dying we often say, "I hope I never wake up. I don't want a slow lingering death."

But I have seen up close, and experienced myself, the pain of a man who never woke up.

And although Mike had plenty of time to redeem and enjoy relationships, I have seen up close the pain of a family whose man went slow and lingering.

And I can assure you that neither is better and both come with regret. Both come with pain.

And even though my examples here are of death, we can insert any struggle that comes into our life. Because what we all have in common in regard to life's challenges is the comparison game.

We think we'd gladly trade our test, our struggle for our friend's struggle. "Theirs can't be as bad as ours."

But then the friend that we just alluded to is probably thinking the same of us. Because every lot in life has some level of regret.

And so we often turn to God and ask why. We wonder if we've done something to deserve this struggle. We wonder if we're on the wrong path.

But following Jesus is not a circumstantial gospel. It's not about our circumstances. It's not about where we are or what we're going through.

Following Jesus is a *with you* gospel. At the heart of our faith is the foundational truth that God wants to be *with you* and that if we have entered into relationship with Him, His promise is primarily, foundationally, to be WITH us.

These are Jesus' parting words. He is giving us the Great Commission. He's telling us in one bold concise statement about our life, with Him as our savior and leader. And He tells us to go out and share our faith everywhere. And he wraps it with this:

"...And be sure of this: I am *with you always*, even to the end of the age."
Matthew 28:20 nlt

And this is so critical to our faith--this is so critical for us to understand that foundationally, God's promise is to be WITH US, NO MATTER WHAT!

It's not a promise of a painless death.

It's not a promise of having plenty of time to say goodbye before we pass away.

It's not a promise that our kids are going to be healthy and awesome.

It's not a promise that your spouse won't cheat on you.

It's not a promise that the kids at school won't make fun of you.

It's not a promise_____ (what would you put in there?)

At the heart of following God, is knowing that our faith is a *with you* gospel.

And here's what I know firsthand in the last several weeks:

No matter how much faith we have, when challenges land in our lap that we cannot control, it's easy to wrongly think that God promises to fix things on earth.

It was easy for me to think, "God, why aren't you taking Mike? God, he's served you well, why aren't you taking him?"

It was easy for me to think, "God, you can do all things--why didn't you wake up George that night? Why are you allowing his family to endure this?"

And here's the thing: those thought's betray a faulty faith that thinks God promises to keep hard things from happening in this earthly life.

Those thoughts reveal a "fix it" gospel or a "protection" gospel or a "God always keeps bad things from happening" gospel.

But what we have been graciously given is a *with you* gospel.

And we see this in the Psalms.

My flesh and my heart may fail,
 but God is the strength of my heart
 and my portion forever.

Psalm 73:26 niv

1. "My flesh and my heart may fail" = bad things may happen, challenges will come upon us
2. "God is the strength of my heart" = a promise. Externally I may take hits, but INTERNALLY I have the PROMISE of the strength of God. Because of God, my spirit will endure.
3. "and my portion forever" means God's promise to be *with us*, eternally in heaven. Things will happen to us HERE, but this is the relational, eternal promise that there will be a time where God will fix things once and for all and we will live *with Him*.

So Here are three huge cornerstones of our faith:

1. *With us* gospel
 From now through eternity, God promises to be with us, no matter what!
2. Pain happens
 In our earthly life, we will have hardship. God *may* fix or heal us (LOTS of stories that He does), but there is NO promise that he will keep us from pain in this life. In fact His Word promises struggles. (John 16:33)
3. All good in the end
 God promises to fix everything on the other side of heaven. God wins. We win.

Why did I tell us those three things?

1. So that at the onset of challenges, we will fight off the temptation to be mad at God for things He never promised to prevent--that way we can spend less time playing the futile and aggravating "Why God?" game.

SELAH

Ok, so I've been pretty clinical about how we respond to struggles--to help us have the proper biblical understanding--the right mindset.

But what I love about the Psalms is we get the emotion *and* the mind of the Psalmist.

Open up Psalm 77. We're going to look at this in *The Message* because I love how it makes this (and so many other Psalms) breathe and come to life.

As we begin Psalm 77, notice the emotion and what kind of state the Psalmist is in:

Psalm 77 *The Message*

I yell out to my God, I yell with all my might,
I yell at the top of my lungs. He listens.

I found myself in trouble and went looking for my Lord;
my life was an open wound that wouldn't heal.

(What kind of a state is this person in?...“an open wound that wouldn't heal” How many of us have felt that before? Maybe now?)

When friends said, “Everything will turn out all right,”
I didn't believe a word they said.

I remember God—and shake my head.
I bow my head—then wring my hands.

I'm awake all night—not a wink of sleep;
I can't even say what's bothering me.

I go over the days one by one,
I ponder the years gone by.

I strum my lute all through the night,
wondering how to get my life together.

(This is someone experiencing loss...pain...something big and life-jarring.)

(Now the psalmist is worked up even more, ratcheting things up a bit...)

Will the Lord walk off and leave us for good?

Will he never smile again?

Is his love worn threadbare?

Has his salvation promise burned out?

Has God forgotten his manners?

Has he angrily stalked off and left us?

“Just my luck,” I said. “The High God goes out of business
just the moment I need him.”

(How many of us have wondered where God is in the midst of a mess?...

How many times in recent weeks, in the wake of George & Mike's death did I say, “God, c'mon? God, I need You to show up here...God, what are you doing?”

This is what we do. This is normal. It's ok. And this is what people did between 1440-500 B.C. when these Psalms were written.

But the psalmist doesn't stay in this mode. Watch what happens in this next section.)

Once again I'll go over what GOD has done,
 ("ok, ok, I'm going to make myself do this.")

lay out on the table the ancient wonders;
 I'll ponder all the things You've* accomplished,

(Notice he turns TO* God here. When we're mad, like the first part of this psalm, we talk to other people, not to the person we're mad at. But now the psalmist is calming down and only now addresses God.)

and give a long, loving look at your acts.

(The psalmist cools down. He says in essence, "I know much more about God than what is transpiring in front of me right now. Let me remember all the good things God has done in my life--let me look and see the body of evidence this loving God has shown me.)

O God! Your way is holy!

No god is great like God!

You're the God who makes things happen;
 you showed everyone what you can do—

You pulled your people out of the worst kind of trouble,
 rescued the children of Jacob and Joseph.

(remember Exodus, Moses leading Israelites out of Egypt)

Ocean saw you in action, God,
 saw you and trembled with fear;
 Deep Ocean was scared to death.

Clouds belched buckets of rain,
 Sky exploded with thunder,
 your arrows flashing this way and that.

From Whirlwind came your thundering voice,
 Lightning exposed the world,
 Earth reeled and rocked.

You strode right through Ocean,
 walked straight through roaring Ocean,
 but nobody saw you come or go.

Hidden in the hands of Moses and Aaron,
 You led your people like a flock of sheep.

SELAH

I love the Psalms, because there are moments like the first part of Psalm 77--the Psalmist is like Lt. Dan in the crow's nest of the shrimpin' boat in Forrest Gump--screaming at God wondering where he is in the midst of the storm.

And in that, the Psalmist tells us it's ok to be real with God. He can take it. He wants to be *with us*--every part of us. So be mad. Vent. Get it out--to God. But don't stay there.

In the second part of Psalm 77 **God shows us that the proper response to challenge is: gratitude.** (today's BIG IDEA)

We aren't grateful for catastrophe.

(And PLEASE don't walk up to hurting people and say,
"Well, guess this is all part of God's plan.")

It's a fallen world and pain happens. That doesn't make it God's plan. God redeems pain. He comforts and walks us through it. That doesn't mean it was his plan-- that's God being God.)

But like the psalmist, we too slow down and look at everything we know of this loving, providing God.

As we are grateful that God revealed Himself in the person of Jesus Christ, to pay for our sins, to make a way for the Holy Spirit to indwell us, and for a life WITH US from now thru eternity.

We are grateful for all God has done in our life PRIOR TO the catastrophe.

We are grateful for God's provision for us IN THE MIDST of catastrophe.

We are grateful that God promises to walk us THROUGH catastrophe.

We are grateful that God promises a SOMEDAY were catastrophes don't exist.

I cannot begin to tell you while I was reeling from my own loss of George and Mike, while trying to minister to their families that I love, how many times I said to myself or to Sandra,

"How in God's name do people get through this without a relationship with Jesus?"

"How do people get through this without a faith that on the other side there is no pain, only peace?"

But I can tell you, in that day that George passed. As it was only Suzanne and I in that house. Dialing the numbers of children, family and friends--that I chose faith in those moments more than I felt it.

On stormy days we choose to believe all the things of God that we mindlessly believe about Him on sunny days.

And like the psalmist, after we've ranted, wailed, questioned, gotten angry... we then turn to gratitude. We choose to be grateful"

Grateful to be part of a lives like George's and Mikes.

Grateful for all the amazing ways God used those relationships in so many lives.

Grateful knowing we could not list all the ways God has been good to us and provided for us throughout our entire life.

Even if you would say you're not a Christ follower--consider the vast expanse of nature we enjoy--all created, provided for us by a loving God, that wants to be with us.

Psalm 19 says,

"The heavens proclaim the glory of God. The skies display His craftsmanship. Day after day they continue to speak; night after night they make Him known." Psalm 19:1-22

Grateful that in even in the worst times imaginable--like the loss of good friends--that God would use people like you and me to minister to families that we love. As difficult as it was to lead these great men's funeral, I was grateful for their relational touch in my life and grateful that God had prepared me to speak on their behalf, honoring them and their families. Grateful...

Grateful that even when things end in death, Jesus has conquered even that, so it's not the end--it's only, "Good bye for now," for those who believe.

Grateful that this unfathomable God wants so much to be with us, use us, love us until our temporary time on this earth is done.

Psalm 77 shows the path out of challenging times, goes through gratitude.

(Let's stand... sing "10,000 Reasons")