

FAITH AND SIGNIFICANCE

by Doug Goins

Last Tuesday and Thursday evenings Candy and I visited some very good friends of ours, Jay and Dianna Heeb to watch the Giants win both games in the pennant race on television. We are all big baseball fans, but throughout both games Jay and Dianna wanted to talk about much more important things than baseball. Jay, a junior high teacher in Mountain View, was really concerned that God would use him in the classroom. He confessed at one point that God had convicted him of his impatience with the students in his class whose English was not very good, so he has begun to go to night school to learn Spanish just so he can communicate more effectively with those children. It was very clear to me that Jay is not just a careerist. He really sees it as his vocation from the Lord.

Jay and Dianna both talked about their decision to stay in this community as part of this church family so that they can have a ministry in their school system and their neighborhood, even though staying here means that they can't afford to buy a house. We talked about raising children, and what it means to have kids grow up to love the Lord Jesus and serve him. Jay pulled out some new books that he had bought on Christian apologetics because he wanted to be able to give answers to people about why he believes what he does.

I am grateful for people like the Heebs in my life; men and women who are serious about life; who want to talk about more than real estate values, sports rivalries, fashion, where to go on vacation, or how to invest money. Candy and I agreed that this is a young couple who are really concerned about the essential things in life. They desire to have lives of spiritual significance that count for God and that have authenticity, integrity, and faithfulness. All of us hunger for that kind of significance if we have a relationship with the Lord Jesus. We all want to know that we are in the spiritual mainstream of life and not just drifting in some selfish backwater, wrapped up in ourselves. We want to know that God will give us adventure, influence, purpose, and challenge.

Psalm 132 was written for pilgrims who longed for significance in life. This Song of Ascents proclaims good news: As pilgrims who are journeying toward the heavenly Zion, the city of God; who are following the upward call of God in Christ Jesus; we have the privilege of being part of the most significant activity in the universe. Psalm 132 is a royal psalm; it is a prayer for God's blessing and activity in the life of the king and his people, Israel. It was probably a prayer of King Solomon after he dedicated the temple in Jerusalem. In 2 Chronicles 5-7 there is an account of the service of dedication for Solomon's temple and his prayer of dedication. He prays in 2 Chronicles 6:41-42:

"Now arise, O LORD God, and come to your resting place,
you and the ark of your might.
May your priests, O LORD God, be clothed with salvation,
may your saints rejoice in your goodness.
O LORD God, do not reject your anointed one.
Remember the great love promised to David your servant."

Those verses are almost identical to verses 8-10 of our psalm, which is why many scholars think that Psalm 132 was composed by Solomon. He regarded the dedication of the temple and the placement of the ark of the covenant in the most holy place in that temple as one of the greatest moments in the history of the nation Israel. For the ark it was the climax of a journey that had begun in the wilderness at Mount Sinai four hundred years earlier. Solomon remembers his father King David, who had successfully searched for the ark and found it in disrepair and neglect, and had brought it to Jerusalem for placement in the tabernacle. Solomon desires in this prayer that he experience the same kind of effectiveness that his father enjoyed. This psalm is a prayer for God's presence and power, for a joyful lifestyle of significant ministry, and for God to continue to bless and save in the life of the king. Solomon prays that he would live a life worthy of his calling, and we can pray that with him.

The psalm falls naturally into three sections. The first seven verses are rooted in historical fact as Solomon remembers the spiritual significance of the life of his father David. Verses 8 through 10 focus on present experience and need in Solomon's life. He asks for that same significance in his own life that his father enjoyed. And the last eight verses are a prayer of joy and confident hope for the future, as he anticipates messianic fulfillment. Solomon sees in verses 11 through 18 that spiritual significance is promised for all of King David's spiritual sons and daughters including the Lord Jesus, the great King, and us who belong to him.

THANKFUL FOR THE LEGACY

Let's look this prayer of remembrance of history in the first seven verses:

Remember, O LORD, in David's favor,
all the hardships he endured;
how he swore to the LORD
and vowed to the Mighty One of Jacob,
"I will not enter my house
or get into my bed;
I will not give sleep to my eyes
or slumber to my eyelids,
until I find a place for the LORD,
a dwelling place for the Mighty One of Jacob."

Lo, we heard of it in Ephrathah;
we found it in the fields of Jaar.
"Let us go to his dwelling place;
let us worship at his footstool!"

The subject of those verses is David's desire and effort to bring the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem. The first two verses focus on David's motivation. They emphasize his character, his central passion in life. The Old Testament describes David as a servant of Yahweh, one who lived a life in absolute obedience to and submissive confidence in God. David's life was a stark contrast to his predecessor Saul's. Saul basically used his office to meet his own needs and satisfy his own desires. David was not like Saul. He had just one desire: to use his position as king to further the purposes of God.

From the moment that David became king of the united tribes, he was concerned to find and bring the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem. The ark was a box made under the supervision of Moses. It was forty-five inches long, twenty-seven inches high, and about twenty-seven inches wide. It was made of wood and covered with gold. The lid was solid gold and was called the mercy seat. There were two cherubim, angelic figures, with their wings spread over the mercy seat. The ark of the covenant was a symbol of God's presence and power among his people. It was a throne of authority. It was a symbol of his lordship over the nation. The ark had accompanied Israel from Sinai through all the forty years of wilderness wandering. During the conquest of Canaan it had been housed in Shiloh. In a battle with the Philistines under Saul's leadership, the ark had been captured. The Philistines had displayed it as a trophy of war until it became a problem and was returned to Israel and laid neglected in a field outside of a small village near Bethlehem for twenty years.

Verses 3-5 talk about David's committed activity to bring that ark to Jerusalem. Look at the "I wills" in these verses: "I will not enter my house...I will not give sleep to my eyes...until I find a place for the Lord." What he does in verses 3-5 is follow through on the commitment he made. (Another reason that this is probably a psalm of Solomon is that David's commitment or vow is not recorded anywhere in the Scriptures, but Solomon his son knew the promise that he had made to bring the ark to the place where it belonged.) This was a commitment to restore the spiritual symbolism of the ark to the center of the life of the nation. It had been marginalized; but now God's absolute power, presence, and authority; his lordship; would be at the center of worship and would be a unifying force for the people. Second Samuel 6 and 1 Chronicles 13-16 show that this search-and-rescue mission was a very difficult process for David to follow through on, but he made it his first

priority. He wouldn't be distracted from it.

In verses 6-7, Solomon broadens the focus from David's effort to the entire nation. There is a sense of community celebration and joy. David's single-mindedness is really attractive to the nation. So the singular pronouns become plural:

"Lo, we heard of it in Ephrathah,
we found it in the fields of Jaar.
'Let us go to his dwelling place;
let us worship at his footstool!'"

That dynamic is amazing to me. Here was one man whose heart was totally submissive to God's power and presence. And when any individual is sold out to the Lord, his integrity, focus, and enthusiasm are contagious. David turned an entire nation around from neglecting the ark and being disinterested in making God central to joyfully wanting to worship and serve God. First Chronicles 15-16 records that there were about thirty thousand people who accompanied David when he brought the ark to Jerusalem, including priests and soldiers and Levitical musicians. They traveled seven miles with the king. Remember, last week we saw David dancing before the ark, he was so excited about what God had allowed him to do. He couldn't control his joy. So in these first seven verses Solomon is remembering how his father changed the way the nation thought about God. And in the same way for us, joyful surrender to Jesus Christ really is attractive; people are drawn to that kind of life.

In these verses Solomon affirms his sense of history and even his own place in the flow of salvation history. He understands that he lives in solidarity with the past in what Edith Schaeffer calls the "perpetual relay of truth." He recognizes as he stands to dedicate this temple built to God's honor and glory that his desire for significant service as the king is dependent on what others have done before him. He realizes that the heritage of his father was really a gift of God's grace.

The fact that I stand here this morning and serve this church family as a pastor and an elder is in large measure because of my heritage from my own father. My father was saved when I was four years old, and when I was five he told the Lord he would be a shepherd. That is what he has been without losing focus for forty-four years. Probably most of what I know of shepherding people I learned by watching my dad. I was thinking about my dad this week in preparation for this. He is a man of humility; he has never been self-serving or self-aggrandizing. He has taught me a lot about humility. He has had the same kind of singleness of purpose as David in drawing people to come into relationship with Jesus. My dad has been committed to clearly and carefully teaching the word of God to people; he was an expository preacher before I ever knew what that was as a kid. Along with Solomon, I am grateful for the legacy of my own dad and what he has taught me.

In verses 8-10 Solomon focuses on the present. He is overwhelmed by his awesome responsibilities as king. He is aware of the realities that could overcome him. He knows about his own sinfulness and the fact that it could undermine his effectiveness. He asks for three things here:

Arise, O LORD, and go to thy resting place,
thou and the ark of thy might.
Let thy priests be clothed with righteousness,
and let thy saints shout for joy.
For thy servant David's sake
do not turn away the face of thy anointed one.

In verse 8 Solomon first asks for God's presence and power to be at work in his life, that God would dwell or rest with his people. He asks that even as the physical ark is placed in the most holy place in the temple, God would be there in spiritual reality as well. Solomon understood that ritual and religious activity and symbols were devoid of any meaning without spiritual reality. The ark wasn't magic. At one point Israel had lost a battle because they had put their faith in the ark instead of in God. They were in a war against the Philistines, and without calling on God's resources, they went into battle and presumptuously put the ark in front of them, thinking it would somehow work as a talisman or a charm. They were crushed and the ark was captured.

Solomon is praying as the king, "Lord, I can go through all the motions of planning, leading, teaching, ruling, and worshiping; but if you don't infuse that activity with your presence and power, it is a total waste of time and effort."

Verse 9 is a request for priestly ministry that will result in joy, a recognition that if there is to be any joy in what we do, we must do it God's way. This is also a lesson from Israel's history. There were two different times that David tried to bring the ark from Kiriath-jearim to Jerusalem. The first time, in David's enthusiasm and excitement he ignored divine revelation. The law clearly said that the ark was to be carried by the priests. But David put the ark into a cart drawn by oxen as if it were a piece of furniture, the way the Philistines transported things, and took off for Jerusalem. At one point the ark was tottering unsteadily and a man named Uzza reached out to steady it. He dropped dead. That was a terrible price to pay for underestimating the ministry of the priesthood. The second time, three months later, when David brought up the ark the priests had offered the appropriate sacrifices to the Lord, they were robed in priestly vestments, and they carried the ark into the city as God had required. The result was not death but celebration and joy.

This is true for us as well; there is important symbolism here. God can't be brought to the center of anybody's life, ours or anybody else's that we try to impact, without the work of the great High Priest, Jesus Christ. Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father but by me." When we try to help people without the message of the cross of Christ, life won't result. Death will just be perpetuated. And without the sacrificial work of Jesus on the cross, our lives won't end in joy.

Verse 10 is a request that God continue the work of salvation in Solomon's life and the life of the nation. This has strong messianic overtones when it talks about the anointed one. You remember that David had been promised by God that God's kingdom would be built on David's seed. The kings of Israel would be adopted by God into a father-son relationship. Through them the kingdom would endure forever and culminate in the great King, the Messiah Jesus. And now Solomon appeals to God on the basis of his promise to his father David and asks that God not reject him. He fears rejection because he knows his own heart; he is afraid of his own unfaithfulness. He says, "I've got to have access to your presence." He wants to minister as God's anointed, just as David did, with faithfulness and effectiveness.

It is important to see that all three requests for present effectiveness-for God's presence and power to dwell with them, for a priestly ministry of joy, and for God's continuing saving activity and blessing through the Messiah-are all based on what Solomon already knew to be true from past revelation. Solomon is asking God to fulfill promises to which God had already committed himself. He asks for the answer to present needs out of a clear understanding of God's communication and faithfulness.

I would ask you as a church family to pray for the pastors and elders of this church in the same way, that we would learn more and more to call out to God and his resources rather than trust our own. I am learning to pray more like Solomon in my ministry. As I get older and I have tasted enough failure and foolishness, I have learned to trust myself less and less. Remember, I told you that I grew up in a minister's home; I know how to do church, religion, and worship. But I want God to be at work through it; I don't want to play church. More and more I am learning to focus on the cross as the center of life, on the call to die to ourselves. There must be death before we can celebrate. Crucifixion has to come before resurrection. The message of the cross is more and more central in my teaching, preaching, and counseling. As I think about Solomon's awareness of his own heart, his own tendency to be unfaithful, I am understanding the temptations to ego more and more. What I used to baptize as wonderful, youthful ambition I am seeing more and more from God's perspective. Please pray for us who have the responsibility of leadership in this place that we would learn to pray this prayer with Solomon.

Solomon now turns from present needs to look into the future in the last verses, 11-18. I don't know how he got this information; perhaps a prophet of God came and told him what the future held. But these are wonderful words of hope, and they tell Solomon that as rich as the past and the present experience have been, they can't be compared to the glory of the future. This exciting future is based on God's absolute commitment to his people. This is important for us because we are living in that future right now in the messianic age. Eugene Petersen says of this part of the psalm, "It's a daring leap into the future. It's a hopeful race toward God's promises. For people of faith these verses have a propellant quality."

The LORD swore to David a sure oath
from which he will not turn back:
"One of the sons of your body
I will set on your throne.
If your sons keep my covenant
and my testimonies which I shall teach them,
their sons also for ever
shall sit upon your throne."

For the LORD has chosen Zion;
he has desired it for his habitation:
"This is my resting place for ever;
here I will dwell, for I have desired it.
I will abundantly bless her provisions;
I will satisfy her poor with bread.
Her priests I will clothe with salvation,
and her saints will shout for joy.
There I will make a horn to sprout for David;
I have prepared a lamp for my anointed.
His enemies I will clothe with shame,
but upon himself his crown will shed its luster."

The first two verses in this section tell us that it is God himself who is the initiator of these covenant promises. God's vow to David is the promise of the coming Messiah. This is a wonderful counterpoint to David's vow to God which opened the psalm. As the spiritual sons and daughters of David through our faith in Jesus the Messiah, we have an incredible future because that future is based on God's binding oath. Verse 11 tells us clearly that God's oath is unconditional and irrevocable, because it doesn't matter how people respond, it will happen; no matter how bad things get God will not change his mind and decide to operate differently. He will not turn back from his oath to set David's sons on his throne.

But verse 12 says clearly that we can't take advantage of God's promises or presume on them. "If your sons keep my covenant...which I shall teach them...." This reminds us of our own covenant responsibility. Speaking of these two verses Derek Kidner writes, "The warmth and wealth of these promises spring from God's love. And they require an answering love for their fulfillment. Instead, the human response was all too often cynical, treating God's choice as something to be exploited, a shelter against his judgment or an asset to be commercialized." God would establish his rule and authority over the anointed king; it was unconditional and irrevocable. But if the king were not to give his whole heart in love to *Yahweh*, he wouldn't enjoy the kingdom authority that God intended him to have. Remember the history of the kings of Israel and Judah (the divided the kingdom) who followed Solomon. Very few of those men were faithful to the covenant, and most of them didn't enjoy the rule of God in their lives. Yet their unfaithfulness didn't destroy God's faithfulness to the nation.

It struck me this week that verses 11 and 12 establish the beautiful and mysterious balance between God's absolute sovereignty and our responsibility to him. God's banner of love does fly over us; he has chosen us and claimed us. But his love calls us to submission, to whole-hearted responsiveness. And his radical commitment to us should be powerful motivation for us to give our whole hearts to him.

That motivation is strengthened by the promises that God makes in verses 13-18 to meet future needs. Verses 13 and 14 talk about God's promise of his presence and power, that he will dwell with us individually:

"For the LORD has chosen Zion;
he has desired it for his habitation:
"This is my resting place for ever;
here I will dwell, for I have desired it."

That is answering the request that Solomon made back in verse 8 for the authentic spiritual life of God to be present and active. Here in these two verses God says he has already chosen to dwell or rest there, forever. It was his initiative before he was ever asked.

And remember, we are now the temple of God. He is inside of us. In Ephesians 3 Paul uses the same word for dwell that is used here: "...that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith...." Think about your own personal history with God. The longer you grow in the Lord, the more you realize how he has pursued you and gotten your attention, perhaps by allowing difficulty in your life, perhaps by speaking to you through people who loved you and loved him as well, and brought him to you. He chose you and claimed you; he was the initiator of that love relationship with you. And now you are growing in the certainty of the permanence of that relationship, and God through Christ is at the center of your life. He is really at home there, dwelling and resting; he is not just a visitor. I hope you see your relationship with God that way. He loves living inside of you! He feels totally at home. And he is going to stay forever. That's really what these two verses are saying to us about how he gives significance to our lives.

In verses 15 and 16 God promises a joyful priestly ministry:
"I will abundantly bless her provisions;
I will satisfy her poor with bread.
Her priests I will clothe with salvation,
and her saints will shout for joy."

This is answering the request that Solomon made in verse 9.

This is the promise of abundant life for us, of life-sustaining bread. Jesus said that he is the bread of life who gives us spiritual nourishment, that no one who trusts in him will be too needy or too starved in this life. Then joy is promised in the Lord Jesus himself in terms of this priestly ministry that he has accomplished for us and that we now have the privilege of extending to other people. The apostle Paul writes in Romans 5:11, "...We also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received our reconciliation." In Romans 15:15-16 he also rejoices in "the grace given [him] by God to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the gospel of God." Because of what Jesus, the great High Priest, did in offering himself sacrificially, now we are priests to one another and to a world that is desperately hurting. We can be assured of joy in our lives as we minister to others because God has clothed us in robes of righteousness, the same robes symbolically that the priests wore in their ministry; and because Jesus' perfect priestly life is being expressed through us.

Understanding this spiritual reality has really changed my approach emotionally to counseling, interacting with people, teaching and preaching, and sharing the gospel. It has lifted a great weight of anxiety off of me; the truth of verses 15 and 16 is that it is God at work in all of my effort. Jesus said it is the work of the Holy Spirit to "convince the world of sin and of righteousness." It is not my job as a preacher or teacher or counselor to accomplish the ministry, but the work of the Spirit through me. That results in a great relief, a joyful sense of hope and freedom.

In verses 17 and 18 God promises continuing saving activity through the Messiah:

"There I will make a horn to sprout for David; I have prepared a lamp for my anointed. His enemies I will clothe with shame, but upon himself his crown will shed its luster."

Here God is answering the request of Solomon back in verse 10. The question is, how significant will the reign of Messiah be? There are three symbols that Solomon uses to illustrate its impact: a horn of salvation, a lamp of illumination, and a crown of authority. The sprouting horn is most literally the exploding horn. The horn on the nose of a rhinoceros, its horn of battle, is a symbol of explosive strength. And after the crucifixion Jesus Christ lay dead in the grave, but on Easter morning the power of the resurrection exploded him out of that grave. He ascended, then he was glorified at the right hand of God for us, and now he sits with all power and authority in the universe.

The lamp of the Messiah speaks of his ministry of illuminating truth, helping men and women to understand

the most fundamental basic realities of life. Jesus said, "I am the light of the world."

Finally, that shining crown of authority symbolizes the dazzling intensity of Christ as King. He has a radiance or a luster that will cause all the other contenders for authority in our lives-and there are many who clamor to somehow have an edge on us, control us, or have authority over us-to pale in comparison. They will be ashamed because of the living reality of his resplendence. Jesus said, "All authority on heaven and earth has been given to me."

We can be encouraged by the promise of the horn of salvation, the light of understanding, and the crown of authority, all of which symbolize the victorious work of Jesus Christ on our own behalf and then through us as well, when we reach out to other people in serving him. And we can rejoice in the certainty that this ongoing work of the Messiah in our lives will be powerful and eternally significant.

I am thrilled with the text of an anthem by Dan Burgess that summarizes the heart of these last verses:

Do not be cast down, for we serve the victor.
Do not be afraid, he has conquered sin and death.
Do not be cast down, for his hand is upon you,
Working all things out for your good.

Lift up your head and stand tall before him.
Rest in the Lord, for he is in control.
Lift up your head, bring it all before him
Where broken hearts and broken lives are made whole.

I got a letter this week from a very dear friend of many years, Joanie Mathis, who once served among us as a printer at Discovery Publishing. She has that same concern for broken hearts and lives. For the last couple of years Joanie has been burdened to minister in hospitals and prisons as a chaplain. She has just completed a two-year training program, and this letter rejoices that God got her through the program. She is now licensed and ordained.

She was talking about some of the anxiety she feels because, she says, "I don't just want to go through the motions of counseling, discipling, worship-leading, and teaching. But I really want to follow the Lord into the secular world of private psychiatric hospitals and into the prison system." She shares in the letter that right now she is interviewing in a private hospital up the peninsula that has a ward for gays and lesbians, and she asks for prayer. She says, "I'm a little bit apprehensive and frightened...." And yet she says later, "I'm praying I can get my foot in the door past any hindrances so I can minister to all these hurting people. I was a little discouraged at first, but then the Lord gave me such a peace about going for it, and then such a strengthening in spirit, that I just have to believe that he will get me in there. He promised that the gates of hell wouldn't prevail against us, and I am believing him for that. Please keep me in prayer for next week. Pray that he would blanket me with his favor and grace in the staff's eyes. The Lord has given me a burden for his lost ones in this hospital, and he wants me to reach them."

The thing I was most grateful for when I opened the letter on Thursday afternoon was that Joanie says in it that the passage of Scripture that has encouraged her and strengthened her as she faces her future is Psalm 132:13-18. She says about these verses, "I believe that the Lord will do what he says in this psalm. He will provide abundantly, he will satisfy the poor with bread through this ministry, both physical bread and especially spiritual bread. He will bring salvation to those who don't yet know him. He will make the horn of David grow, and he will cause Jesus to shine forth as the light of life."

Do you want the kind of significance and effectiveness in your life that Joanie is so excited about? Do you want to live with that kind of impact on the people around you? Do you wish you had an experience of greater stability and strength? Do you desire more depth and wisdom in your thinking and in the choices you make in life? Do you want courage to replace fear and discouragement? All of that is promised in Psalm 132 through God's commitment first to David, then to Solomon, then to the Lord Jesus, and now to each one of us who know him by faith and love him with all our hearts. What a glorious certainty of spiritual significance and

effectiveness we are promised!

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