

God Rolls Up His Sleeves: A Paulin Devotional

Psalm 65

The Scripture readings for this weekend include Psalm 65, but most of Sunday's service will centre around the Gospel passage. I wanted to include Psalm 65 in the end-of-week devotional because it will lead beautifully into the sermon topic. Including what I wanted to say about it would have held you captive longer than I felt reasonable on Sunday morning. So please consider this a prelude!

Psalm 65 is a beautiful song of praise to the Creator, and points ahead prophetically to Jesus. But as always in the New Testament, I really like to mine the Hebrew for all its worth, to get things out of the song that might elude us simply reading in some of the English translations.

From the very first verse, we are missing an alternative context. The NIV translates this verse as "Praise awaits you," but there's another possible translation, which would say, "To You, silence in praise."

There's nothing about the silence in the many English translations. In today's world, especially, I think that matters. We tend to worship a bit noisily, don't we? Especially in some churches, where there might be more of a rock-concert feel than a church sanctuary. Don't get me wrong - I can really enjoy an exciting praise and worship session! But this psalm reminds us right away of the time for the holy silence of adoration.

A time for stillness. A time for trust.

What does that look like? Maybe it looks like not crying out over and over again with the plea, but taking the time to listen for the answer from God. Or resting, in trust and stillness, to see what He will do, in *his* time. Maybe it's just sitting with your raw hurt, in God's presence, and knowing that He's got you. That He's with you, through all of it, wherever it leads. That trusting stillness matters to God. That's praise. That's relationship.

In verse three, in the NIV, we read, "When we were overwhelmed by sins, you forgave our transgressions." I won't deny that's meaningful, that's profoundly important. But again, we are missing some of the poetry, and this ties so deeply into Sunday's sermon that I really want to stay in this place for a minute.

Without delving too deeply into Hebrew (the original languages are exciting, as they begin to open up to me in my studies!). There's a disruption to normal Hebrew word order here, and it's very intentional. Words are rearranged (which is allowed) for emphasis. The sentence begins with "Divrei avonot" - the matters of twisted ways, really, is what that means - or simply "sins" in the NIV.

The matters of our twisted ways. Our sins.

The next word is Gavru - there's the verb, which usually comes first in a sentence. And it means "have conquered," or "have mastered" - followed by menni; "over me."

Literally, the matters of twisted ways have conquered over me.

Grammatically, that sentence means it's DONE. It's finished, it's over. The action in the verb is entirely completed. If it were a wrestling match with sin, sin has the psalmist pinned to the ground and the match is OVER.

But then comes the second half of the verse, with Jesus written all over it. For a Christian, the entire Old Testament is pregnant with the expectation of our Saviour. And here the psalmist looks forward.

Again, the word order is weird, but it's for weight. Instead of "you forgave our transgressions," in the Hebrew, we get "Pesha'enu Attah Techapperem" - Our transgressions/rebellions YOU continuously scrub away/cover them.

We lay in the dust in the first half of the verse, pinned to the mat. Then we move into the weight of our sins - sitting atop us.

But then - before the verb, before what's going to happen - "Attah" - YOU - God. God is right there. He's RIGHT THERE, to the rescue.

Grammatically, Hebrew has a way of doing things with verbs to make them more intense, and to change how they happen. And that's what's happening with the verb "Techapperem." The verb is forgiveness - but there is NO "perfect" (completed) tense for this verb in this context. It doesn't exist. Forgiveness, in Hebrew, is never complete and finished. It is always ongoing, it's continuous. It's not a passive tidying service that gets done and someone walks away from the building, locking up, the job over.

In ancient texts outside the Bible, this verb in this form was actually used to describe the physical scrubbing of walls of a defiled temple, to erase stains, contaminants - soot, that

kind of thing.

When the verb is used this way, the language is begging you to understand the kind of work God is doing in your life. He is rolling up our sleeves to tackle our mess, where our failures and sins have us pinned to the floor, and he's intensely rubbing out the stains of that mess, all the time.

Someone brave enough to have battled through this thought process so far with me is possibly wondering, "Hey, but what about 'It is finished'? Doesn't that conflict with Jesus crying out on the cross that the debt was paid in full?"

It doesn't, I promise. That debt is paid, in full, forever. But just as we make a commitment to continue a new life in Christ, God makes the commitment to stay alongside us every inch of the way, continually and forever applying the benefit of the cross to our day-to-day messes. He has entered into a permanent relationship of restoration with us.

It's like God bought a piece of land. You can't just buy land, let it sit unnurtured, and expect it to flourish. No, that land takes work if you want beautiful things to happen. It needs water, it needs good soil, it needs weeding, and constant care.

And that takes us directly down the psalm, past the praise of our glorious creator, to verse 9 and beyond - where God cares for the land, and waters it. Once again, that Hebrew word is the same kind of intense, thorough work. That caring is TENDING, it's ongoing, repetitive work. And look at the beautiful structural connection. God is caring for the earth - enriching it abundantly.

On this Thanksgiving weekend, it's a beautiful thing to pause and reflect on how God's ongoing, intensive work in this world is work on both US and the LAND. We are meant to look closely, this harvest week, to see how He enriches it abundantly, where He fills it with water, smooths the land out, levels and softens and blesses it, crowning it with bounty, clothing the hills with gladness, the meadows with flocks, and the valleys with grain.

Take all of that harvest language literally and give thanks to the God for his abundant riches. But also - take it all as metaphor - because he is tending you with the self-same, ongoing care.

On Sunday, we'll be talking about what is and isn't permanent in God's eyes. We're going to talk about what can be scrubbed away, and what is permanently engraved. It's a beautiful continuation of the incredible truth of this psalm.

For today, though - know this.: You aren't pinned to the mat by your sins. You aren't a dry and thirsty land. You are not conquered. No, not at all. He is right there with you, continuously working in you, nurturing you and blessing you. Thanks be to God!

Psalm 65 (NIV)

For the director of music. A psalm of David. A song.

¹ Praise awaits you, our God, in Zion;
to you our vows will be fulfilled.

² You who answer prayer,
to you all people will come.

³ When we were overwhelmed by sins,
you forgave our transgressions.

⁴ Blessed are those you choose
and bring near to live in your courts!
We are filled with the good things of your house,
of your holy temple.

⁵ You answer us with awesome and righteous deeds,
God our Savior,
the hope of all the ends of the earth
and of the farthest seas,

⁶ who formed the mountains by your power,
having armed yourself with strength,

⁷ who stilled the roaring of the seas,
the roaring of their waves,
and the turmoil of the nations.

⁸ The whole earth is filled with awe at your wonders;
where morning dawns, where evening fades,
you call forth songs of joy.

⁹ You care for the land and water it;
you enrich it abundantly.
The streams of God are filled with water

to provide the people with grain,
for so you have ordained it.

¹⁰ You drench its furrows and level its ridges;
you soften it with showers and bless its crops.

¹¹ You crown the year with your bounty,
and your carts overflow with abundance.

¹² The grasslands of the wilderness overflow;
the hills are clothed with gladness.

¹³ The meadows are covered with flocks
and the valleys are mantled with grain;
they shout for joy and sing.

