

Whose Strength is in You
By Sharon W. Better

Today's Treasure

Blessed are those whose strength is in you, whose hearts are set on pilgrimage.
Psalm 84:1 NIV

This passage from Isaiah is one of my favorite in Scripture. It is especially helpful in this season of life:

Even to your old age, I will be the same, and even to your graying years, I will bear you! I have done it, and I will carry you; And I will bear you and I will deliver you.
Isaiah 46:4

In it are treasures just waiting to be discovered by people burdened by the dark hearts of humanity and the brokenness of our world. As I write, peaceful protests with the purpose of exposing systemic racism and demanding reform continue to break out into violence. Numerous small business owners watch helplessly as their life-long savings disappear in the wake of looters whose hearts do not seem set on righteousness but rather evil. Just this morning, the experiment of “no police” in a few blocks of Seattle ended with police clearing out the protestors after crime and murders increased. Without boundaries, our whole world crashes because our hearts are desperately wicked. If we watch the news, every day brings more despair. Huge losses crush people and only by understanding that “all sin and come short of the glory of God” can we experience order and purpose because Jesus does not leave us without hope.

On the other end of the spectrum are the millions who long to go back to what was before the worldwide pandemic – not racially, but in everyday life. More than one friend has told me she knows for sure she is an extrovert as she battles depression while disconnected from the physical presence of friends, family, and work colleagues. Others mourn the loss of time with grandchildren and corporate worship. How much longer?

One of my favorite and life-giving activities is large family gatherings. Every holiday our house fills up with loved ones, favorite foods, and laughter. Though I love Christmas gatherings, Easter takes first place as family members arrive, already buoyed by worship. Like so many this year, we celebrated Easter without our extended family and all the trimmings of tradition. Accepting this loss, I looked forward to summer, thinking we could make up for lost time. My personal goal for a safe family gathering was July 4, not only our nation's birthday but our daughter's fiftieth birthday. This

morning as I write, one week before this national holiday, our governor announced he is slowing down the reopening of our state because of rising Covid-19 cases in nearby regions. Additionally, the news reported eighteen members from one family contracted COVID-19 while attending a family birthday party. What can we do?

But worse, before the pandemic hit, many people already carried excruciating personal burdens, from providing for families in the middle of a pandemic to a loveless marriage, a prodigal child, caregiving with no end in sight, and more. "I am just tired of it all. Before all this exploded I was barely making it from day to day," is a whispered cry we are hearing more and more. Where do we go for guidance when even the mundane challenges us to rethink how to not just survive but prosper in this strange and often painful season?

LIFE-GIVING ENCOURAGEMENT

First, we must remember none of this is new. The monster of Adam and Eve's sin lives in each of our hearts. During the pandemic quarantine, I caught up on what I call reading for fun. I searched for historical fiction where authors used impeccable research and true to life characters. I focused on the era before King Henry VIII, the Civil War and World War II. While the surroundings were different, certain themes were not. War, murder, betrayal, hatred, brutality and horror, for which there are not enough words, took center stage. Just as the Scriptures say, there is nothing new under the sun. Each story reminded me of James' words:

What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.

James 4:1-3

In one of his soul-stirring messages, theologian D. Martyn Lloyd Jones declared that when World War I ended, people thought we would finally have peace. Instead of embracing their hope, he said he continued to thunder from the pulpit that this world will never have peace because of the total depravity of man. Why would he throw a wet blanket on the relief and joy people hungered for?

For the same reasons the Scriptures repeatedly remind us we are lost because of our total depravity, and yet there is hope. We see this message in Psalm 84. In just a few words, the Psalm writer declares blessings come to those who know they are hopelessly lost, if they live life in their own strength. But O Lord God Almighty, each failure,

whether on their part or universally, becomes an opportunity to embrace their own inability to bring order out of chaos and gratefully surrender to the Lord's forgiveness and presence on their journey Home.

The more we understand the total depravity of humanity, the more we can enjoy the blessings of trusting in God, because He does not leave us without hope:

*For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life.
Romans 6:23*

When we repent of our sins, the Holy Spirit brings earth-moving machines into our hearts and starts bulldozing a path through the mountains and the wilderness, bringing light into the darkness. Those whose eyes are fixed on pilgrimage know the way Home is fraught with danger. But each fearful event reminds them:

*The highway of the upright turns aside from evil; whoever guards his way preserves his life.
Prov. 16:17*

Armed with the knowledge of their own helplessness, with dependence on God's strength and with eyes like flint, they refuse to let their failures or the despair of those around them stall them in darkness for long.

PRAYER

Oh, Father, when wars and hatred create upheaval in our personal lives or even our world, remind us that You sent Jesus to rescue Your children and that You promise we will arrive at our ultimate destination of Home. When we mess up, remind us of the way repentance makes a highway in our hearts that leads to freedom with You.