

Sunday, Feb. 1

With bad weather cancelling church again, Pastor Steve preached via livestream on Psalm 77. This is a Psalm of Asaph, appointed by David as a worship leader when Israel returned the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem. There was a prophetic element to Asaph's music, showing how the Holy Spirit was at work in it. Some 350 years later (2 Chronicles 29), Hezekiah instructed people to sing songs written by Asaph and David.

Asaph's Psalms are filled with lament and reflection: "If you feel like God is a million miles away, this Psalm is for you," Steve said. "Right off the bat, Asaph is describing a posture of faith, that (God) will hear me. He's not doubting that God is there or that He will hear him. Verse 2 describes a posture of prayer: 'Lord, I need You.'"

In verses 3-9, Asaph talks of his spirit fainting, being so troubled he cannot speak, and asking if God's steadfast love has ceased. Steve said he thinks similar doubts occur regularly in the life of believers. Christianity is not one mountaintop after another, but a series of valleys in between.

"You're seeking God and coming up empty," Steve said. "(Asking) 'Where are His promises? Where is His compassion? This is not unusual. It's a normal cycle Christians go through. There are dry seasons. Sometimes a darkness of the soul. Struggles. Depression.'"

This is why verse 10 is a key turning point in this Psalm; Asaph says he will remember the years of the Most High God and what He has done. To this point, he had pleaded with God and been full of grief because God didn't seem to be what Asaph thought He was. But when he confesses his weakness and cries out for God, his outlook changes. The same can happen for a Christian who feels God is distant, but decides to trust in Him anyway, Steve said.

"This is an encouragement to you," he said. "If you're in a dark tunnel, this is what you are to do. Verse 11: 'I will remember the deeds of the Lord. I will ponder all your work.' Asaph is saying, 'What I am going to do is remember God's faithfulness in the past. He's going to remember the work of the Lord in ancient Israel.'"

In the midst of Asaph's malaise, he is returning to Scripture and the reminders of the God "who works wonders" and "redeemed (His) people" (v. 15). Remembering the exodus from Egypt and God providing manna in the desert. Steve said that's why this Psalm is so important—it offers a similar solution today: "He's the God who delivers. It tells me regular reading of Scripture has value."

Sunday, Feb. 8

While we met despite bad weather, Pastor Steve did one more message from Psalms, saying he would return to Romans next Sunday. He preached today from Psalm 51, while also reviewing 2 Samuel 11. And, noted that David wrote this Psalm after the greatest failure in life.

"Imagine that you are willing to write a song about your failure and it's about who God is and how He deals with sin," Steve said before reading 2 Samuel 11:1-5. Then he noted two things: "David was at home when kings go to war; kings lead their men into battle. He should have been in the battle; he's at home...lounging on the couch. Why? Because he's got it made."

In other words, David was doing what we all do during prosperity: get lazy and rest on our laurels. That's why he had the opportunity to commit sin with Bathsheba. Then, compound that sin by trying to cover it up and ultimately killing her husband. "What David does is unbelievably wrong," said Steve, first getting Uriah to return from the battle, in hopes that he would sleep with his wife and they'd think the baby was Uriah's. When that doesn't work, David sends a letter to the commander to put Uriah on the front lines and then withdraw so that he will be killed.

Steve said this tells him that even godly people can get callous toward sin. Not until the prophet Nathan confronted the king did David acknowledge his wrongs. The interesting thing is that David did not make excuses and try to blame it on his upbringing or other "armchair psychology." While Nathan says David won't face the death penalty, there will be consequences: the child will die and David will face future disgrace. To hear what mercy sounds like, he read Psalm 51:1-5, which begins: "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions."

"He makes an appeal to who God is, not who he is," Steve said. "All of us have Ph.D.'s in explaining what we've done. The way David dealt with sin is he acknowledged it and said, 'I'm at fault. My only hope is God and His mercy.' He says, 'Have mercy on me, oh God, according to Your mercy.' David appeals to God's mercy."

While he certainly sinned against Uriah and Bathsheba, David recognized that ultimately all our sin is directed against God, Steve said. So David was saying in Psalm 51 that if the Lord would cleanse him, he would be glad and sing. David didn't promise to "do better," he was saying, "'Lord, I'm prone to wander,'" Steve said. "I need Your help."

Sunday, Feb. 15

Pastor Steve returned to his series in Romans with a review of 7:21 to 8:11. He mentioned the book's teaching that Jesus broke the power of sin, we are no longer its slaves, and we should consider our bodies alive to Christ. However, most people drift toward imperatives: the "do's" and the "don't's."

"My salvation is not based on what I do," Steve said. "It's based on what (Jesus) did. If I get this out of order, I will live my life following the 'do's' and 'don't's.' I will ignore Jesus. We have to look to Jesus (and) the reality of who He is and what He's done."

If we know who God is and who the Savior is, we will live better lives. The good news is that Jesus died for sin, not that we are good people. Steve talked about preaching numerous funerals the past 30 years and how often people like to mention what a good person the deceased was and how "he would give you the shirt off his back." But Scripture says there are none righteous.

You are not a Christian because you quit cussing, smoking and drinking—the "holy trinity of legalism"—but because you received the gift of the Savior, Steve said. We can't earn His favor because it's freely given. The emphasis of Scripture is that we are wicked, but in His mercy God looks at those who accept Christ and says, "Forgiven."

"This is the gospel, the good news," Steve said. "It is overwhelming. The victory is won. Nobody else has to die. The gospel is awesome—a thrill of hope. I believe in

Jesus, who saved me. All of sin is gross; it's terrible. And God the Father laid all our iniquity on the Savior."

Even though Jesus paid the price for our sin, Romans 7 also tells us that there is a war going on in Christians' lives. In verse 21, Paul wrote that when he wanted to do right, evil lay close at hand. Our flesh is at war with our desire to do right because we retain our sinful nature. Galatians 5:16 describes how to win this war: walk in the Spirit so we don't gratify the desires of the flesh.

It's a frustrating reality, Steve said, that we are not yet perfect. We serve God with our mind, but with our flesh we sometimes serve the law of death. It's one reason the promise of Romans 8:1: that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ, is so encouraging. We can't miss the fact that Jesus is our deliverer. Or the great news of Galatians 5:24: those who belong to Christ have crucified the flesh.

Sunday, Feb. 22

Pastor Steve reviewed Romans 7:21 to 8:2 today, starting with a comment on how the world emphasizes "me" time. He said the most hilarious thing in the world is how it thinks the solution to problems is to focus more on ourselves. The more we do, the more anxiety we have.

"Our answer to everything is 'me, focus on me,'" Steve said. "Romans tells me a sinful focus is a focus on me. It expresses itself in problems, lust, and rebellion. But Romans 6 tells us we can be set free from sin. You have to consider yourself dead to sin. (Paul asks), 'How can you who are dead to sin dwell in it?'"

But in 7:21-23, Paul goes on to discuss the conundrum facing every Christian: although he delights in God's law, the fleshly nature wars against him. Steve said this set up the same struggle we face today: 1) doing wrong things even we don't want to, and 2) knowing there are things we should do but don't do them. Although this is a universal issue, Paul doesn't leave us in despair. After asking in verse 24 who will deliver him from this body of death, he answers in 25 that thanks be to God through Jesus.

"The struggle doesn't stop," Steve said. "Christians should not sin and yet everyone has sinned over and over again. Some of you agonize over it. But the fact you do shows that you are a Christian. What Paul is pointing out is that there is a struggle. I want to say 'no' to sin and yet I do it. You're living with this struggle."

Because we live in the Bible Belt, many grew up with a heavy dose of legalism, where modern Pharisees say God had done everything He can do and now it's up to you. The epitome of legalism is its emphasis on avoiding cigarettes, beer and swearing, he said. While he isn't suggesting we do those things, setting up that kind of standard means paying more attention to surface issues while ignoring sins like jealousy, rage, and lust because nobody can see them.

This is a sinful habit because of it's an effort to demonstrate our own righteousness instead of relying on God's, Steve said. The sinful, fleshly part of us doesn't produce anything good. He said that's why Romans 8:1 is so wonderful with its promise of no condemnation for those who are in Christ: "There's no more judgment of you—no more judgment of God waiting to fall on you. Romans 8 tells me I'm not subject to God's wrath, only forgiveness, only acceptance, only hope of a future resurrection."