

Surfing through the channels this past week, there was an old episode of MASH on TV Land. I saw it for only a moment or two. In it a missionary doctor came to the hospital with a child that had fallen and hit his head on a rock, causing a subdural hematoma, which needed surgery to relieve the pressure. He stated that he was not a surgeon and asked the MASH surgeons for help, and they readily accepted the challenge. Before they operated, the missionary prayed along these lines:

“Lord, I thank you that these doctors’ are here in this time of need, and consider it an act of your Providence, bless their work that this one child’s life can be spared.”

There was silence. The surgeons just stared at the missionary, almost in disbelief at what they had just heard. They were there because of a war that brought with it great destruction and much death. If not for the war, they wouldn’t have been there to save the child, which they did.

There are two ways to look at a situation like that. On the one hand, one might ask if it was really necessary to have a war just so these surgeons could be handy when this one child needed them? Is that what

Providence means? There is much complaining to accompany this perspective.

On the other hand, One might see that God’s Providence is not hindered by human failures, that even in the midst of a great tragedy one can see the hand of God healing the sick and raising the dead. With this perspective, there is much rejoicing.

### The Bible Speaks

We find both perspectives in the bible, which reveals its truth by telling about the lives of people. One thinks of Jeremiah, a prophet of the end of Israel’s civilization, whose poetry is some of the darkest in all the bible. He was one of the complainers.

“O Lord you have deceived me, and I have been deceived. You have overpowered me and prevailed. Everyone mocks me.”

He is caught in a rhetorical catch-22. When he speaks in the Lord’s name, he says that it only results in insult and reproach. On the other hand if he decides not to speak, the God’s word burns in his heart like a fire, shut up in his bones, he cannot hold it in.

In one breath (v. 13) he praises God,

“Sing to the lord! Give praise to the Lord! God rescues the life of the needy from the hands of the wicked.”

In the next verse he curses the very day he was born. “May the day my mother bare me not be blessed.” He is very astonishing here. He complains because he was *not* a victim of an abortion. He pronounces a curse on his father for failing to kill him when he was in his mother’s womb, actually desiring his mother as his grave. “Why did I ever come out of the womb to see trouble and sorrow, and to end my days in shame?”

What does one say to that? If one is not overtaken by the sadness of it, then it is at least difficult not to see the contradiction in it. It is as if Jeremiah’s conclusion is that God is wonderful yet the life we have been given is horrible and tragic.

I am inclined not to say anything much to that. Words are unable to carry the freight when someone is in that much pain and grief. Jeremiah’s situation was more tragic than most of ours most of the time, but nevertheless sometimes life does feel that way, like the world is coming to an end.

Even Jesus

Even Jesus spoke in tragic terms. Like so many after him, Jesus as a human being could not imagine things

lasting because the disharmonies and inequities of life were so devastating they could not possibly persist. In view of that situation much of Matthew chapter 10 was written.

“Do you suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth, I did not come to bring peace, but a sword? I have come to turn a man against his father, a daughter against her mother . . . A man’s enemies will be the members of his own household. Anyone who loves his father and mother more than me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it!”

As familiar as these words are, they run counter to the way we ordinarily think about things. Most of the time our approach to family is to love them more than we love anything else, and to enhance and preserve and extend our own lives at almost any cost.

These expressions of the tragic nature of life make sense in view of our experience. So one is impressed by expressions of praise and the goodness of things. Given the nature of life as tragic - trouble and sorrow followed by death - how does one come to such an outpouring of praise as we find in the 86th Psalm?

## Psalm 86

And that brings us to King David, the great King of Israel during her golden age. Many of the psalms are associated with him and at the very least picture him at certain stages of his life. David is one of the rejoicers.

The 86th psalm envisions King David at the height of his journey and it is very helpful in our quest after the answer to this question: Where does praise come from?

It begins with a confession, “I am poor and needy,” and since King David was not poor and needy in the material sense, we must acknowledge that after a manner we are all poor and needy. This may sound like an affront to the poor, but in actuality it expresses a spiritual truth about everyone. We are needy before God.

Then a number of acknowledgments are made:

“You are forgiving and good, O Lord, abounding in love to all who call to you.”

“You are great and do marvelous deeds.”

“Great is your love toward me, you have delivered me from the depths of the grave.”

These are also a part of our experience. If one pays attention, the experience of mercy and goodness in times of trouble is planted like a seed which grows up to praise and gratitude.

The result is a steadfast hope that is not threatened by dire circumstances, but enlivened by them, because when trouble is near, the Lord is nearer still.

Jeremiah’s complaining speaks to the tragedy and may help because it gives voice to the grief that wells up in us. David’s joy speaks to the experience of God’s presence in troubled times; delivering, healing, saving, raising.

There are two reasons for everything that happens: the human reason and the divine reason. There is complaining and there is rejoicing. In the end, the rejoicing wins out.

So take heart and call out to the Lord like David did. God is forgiving and good; compassionate and gracious; slow to anger, abounding in love.

Pay no attention to the arrogant ones, the ruthless ones, those without regard for God, for surely the people will turn and worship, and bring glory to God’s holy name.

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