

HIS FACE SHINES UPON US

Psalm 80

You get up with the first break of light from the dirt floor you sleep on with your family. You break off some pieces of bread and wash it down with foul well water. Then you take more of the bread, fold it into your outer garment and head off to work. All day, except for breaks to drink water and nibble on your bread, you work under the sun hammering off the ends of stone to make them into square blocks to use for buildings. Then, before it gets dark, you return home. You need to get there before night because there are no streetlights and no cars or buses to get you home. When it is dark out at night, it is pitch dark. You get your evening meal of more bread, which you dip into a big pot containing a stew of meat and vegetables. You have your water mixed with a little wine to make taste a little better. Then, because it is dark, you go to bed. Tomorrow will be another day of the same.

“O LORD God, Almighty, how long will your anger smolder against the prayers of Your people? You have fed them with the bread of tears; You have made them drink tears by the bowlful.”

The Psalmist reflects on the kind of life people had in the land of Israel, especially as they were invaded by other peoples. Imagine the kind of life I just described. It was a life in which girls were married around 14-15 because by 20 you were over the hill. Most of your teeth were gone by 30. Only the rich lived past 45. At least half of your children died in infancy, and a major cause of death among young women was child birth. It was a life about which you could say with the Psalmist, *“You have fed them with the bread of tears; You have made them drink tears by the bowlful.”*

How does that compare with our lives? The economy is supposed to be doing better, but it is hard for many to notice that. We hear stories each day about the mess with health care. And we are facing more and more the reality that the traditional American dream will have to end. Up to this point, parents could usually be sure that they were leaving behind a more prosperous life for their children than they had. Our parents lived in houses where the kids shared bedrooms and the whole family had one bathroom. Our grandparents used outhouses. Their

parents didn't have any electricity. Their parents immigrated or lived in sod houses. But with the decline of salaries in proportion to inflation, we may not be able to allow for our grandchildren a more prosperous life than we had.

Yet, would we say that our lives are filled with tears? Yes we may have to work hard, but we sleep in soft beds on carpeted floors, wake up to hot water in the shower and a variety of breakfast foods, drive to our job in a heated car, work in a heated building, and go home to more than just bread and stew. Our water is pure, and our clothes are clean. We don't have to stop when it gets dark at night. We have TV, basketball games, books, Christmas parties, variety to our life. And in this university community our economy is a lot more stable than it is in other places.

We always hear at this time how Christmas is marginalized by all the commercialism. Church becomes something you do on Christmas Eve to carry on the tradition and to see the candles. So it can make it hard for us to understand when the Psalmist says, *“Restore us, O God Almighty; make Your face shine upon us, that we may be saved.”* Restore us—we can feel that way if we are sick in the hospital, grieving a lost one, or out of work. But do we really want to be restored? Does it matter to us that God wants His face to shine upon us?

At Washington, DC Metro Station on a cold January morning a man with a violin plays six Bach pieces for about 45 minutes. During that time approximately two thousand people passed through the station, most of them on their way to work. After 3 minutes a middle-aged man noticed there was a musician playing. He slowed his pace and stopped for a few seconds and then hurried to meet his schedule.

4 minutes later:

The violinist received his first dollar: a woman threw the money in the hat and, without stopping, continued to walk.

6 minutes:

A young man leaned against the wall to listen to

him, then looked at his watch and started to walk again.

10 minutes:

A 3-year old boy stopped but his mother tugged him along hurriedly. The kid stopped to look at the violinist again, but the mother pushed hard and the child continued to walk, turning his head all the time. This action was repeated by several other children. Every parent, without exception, forced their children to move on quickly.

45 minutes:

The musician played continuously. Only 6 people stopped and listened for a short while. About 20 gave money but continued to walk at their normal pace. The man collected a total of \$32.

1 hour:

He finished playing and silence took over. No one noticed. No one applauded, nor was there any recognition.

No one knew this, but the violinist was Joshua Bell, one of the greatest musicians in the world. He played one of the most intricate pieces ever written, with a violin valued at \$3.5 million dollars. Two days before, Joshua Bell sold out a theater in Boston where the price of seats averaged \$100.

God showed His face upon us. St Paul put it this way in 2 Corinthians, *“For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ made His light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.”*

In the Old Testament when you approached a king, you never looked him in the face. You were not worthy to do that. And if he turned his back on you, you were doomed. But God not only faces us in Jesus. He tells us, *“Get up; look Me in the face. See how I love you.”* In Jesus we get to see the face of God Almighty, the King of kings!

But do we walk past that, busy doing this and that? So often it is hard to see the face of God when we turn our back on Him. That is what the people of Israel did. It is what we do even more. That is why God came to our world in Jesus. He

came to place God in the midst of us, right where we are, where we have no choice but to see Him.

One of the great joys of anticipating Christmas is the thought of seeing loved ones—just seeing their faces. It is also one of the great disappointments of this time as we think of those whose faces we will not see. But God shows His face to us in Jesus so that we can see beyond death to eternal life. We live then in the certain that one day we will see God face-to-face and in seeing Him be able to see all those who are with Him.

Sermon delivered by Pastor Mark T. Heilman
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