

Never Shaken

by Steve Zeisler

I hope you will be encouraged to study the Bible as a result of our time together this morning. Proverbs says, "It is the glory of God to conceal a matter, but the glory of kings is to search out a matter. "

Psalm 15 may, at first glance, seem like an unusual place to go treasure-- hunting. It is not very long; it is not powerful poetry; it does not have any evocative imagery; and it is not quoted by the New Testament writers as so many of the psalms are. But this passage of scripture has been a great encouragement to me. Maybe it will spur all of us on to look for treasure in places we would not otherwise look in scripture.

O Lord, who may abide in Thy tent? Who may dwell on Thy holy hill? He who walks with integrity, and works righteousness, And speaks truth in his heart. He does not slander with his tongue, Nor does evil to his neighbor, Nor takes up a reproach against his friend; In whose eyes a reprobate is despised, But who honors those who fear the Lord; He swears to his own hurt, and does not change; He does not put out his money at interest, Nor does he take a bribe against the innocent. He who does these things will never be shaken.

The last phrase of this psalm has a very powerful promise: "He who does these things will never be shaken." Peter says that God's promises are "precious and magnificent." This verse surely qualifies for that description. When David, the psalmist, says there are individuals who will never be shaken, he does not mean that he has discovered a class of people who will never have problems. He is not saying that there are certain individuals who will not face illness or financial insecurity or family fights or dishonest tradesmen or cars that break down or all the other things that afflict the rest of us. He is saying that there are some who will not have their peace of mind, their security and their stability taken from them by those very circumstances.

This reminds me, in some ways, of my attitude toward exercise. I hate to run! (I may be the only person in California who hates to run!) But I do hate it, and I resent the fact that I should do it. I am angry while I am running, and I look forward to stopping as soon as possible. Yet if I can substitute a contest, a basketball game for instance, for the same kind of pressure, well, I am delighted; I look forward to that. The demand being made on my muscles and my lungs is probably precisely the same, or maybe even greater, but my attitude is different. The way I feel about it, the way I respond to it, what it does to me inside is different.

That is the discovery David made. There are some people who, despite what is being asked of them, despite what pressure is being exerted, will never be shaken, their joy will not be taken away. Now if this promise in scripture is true, there are few things in the world more important than discovering what are "these things" that produce an unshakeable kind of life.

Well, they are given to us in ten phrases in verses 2 through 5. Verse 2 is a kind of summary statement, an "umbrella," that gathers together the main idea. Verse 3, underneath that "umbrella," develops the theme by talking about our speech, what we do with our tongue, whether we are the kind of people who are unwilling to hurt others by what we say. (The third chapter of the letter of James deals with that subject in great detail. His summary is that "the tongue is a fire . . . set on fire by hell," and a man who can learn to control what he says can control everything else about him. We see that same idea here in Psalm 15.) Verse 4 deals with whether or not we are the kind of people who are really committed to what we say we believe And verse 5 deals with the question of whether or not we are masters or servants of our money.

Verse 2,

He who walks with integrity, and works righteousness, And speaks truth in his heart.

Our "walk" and our "work" together describe the whole endeavor of daily living. Our work may be the things we intend to do, the plans, the decisions we make at the beginning of the day. The "walk with integrity" may describe the unintended things that happen to us during the day -- the casual conversations, the interruptions, the reflections that go through our minds. But together, our walk and our work make up what occurs in the real world, and the psalmist is saying that our lives ought to consist of integrity and righteousness. Then the final phrase in verse 2, "And speaks truth in his heart," adds to the degree of difficulty in concluding these things about ourselves by forbidding us to rationalize and deceive ourselves about what is really going on. Not only am I to have integrity and righteousness, I am also to be honest about whether or not these things are present in my life.

Having laid this before us, verse 3 now takes up the issue of what we say. Do we hurt others by our speech? The question I have tried to ask myself in deciding whether this is true of me is, "Do I give in to the temptation to make myself look better, to be more impressive, to excuse my actions, by undercutting those around me? Do I want to appear taller by shortening everybody else in sight?" We are all tempted to depreciate other people in order to elevate ourselves, and that is the issue at stake here in verse 3. Ephesians 4 says, "Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, that it may give grace to those who hear. "

The hardest example for me to deal with in verse 3 is the last one, " . . . Nor takes up a reproach against his friend." Have you ever been in situations where there was an "in" crowd, a group of people whose respect and approval you wanted, and in the course of the conversation a friend, a brother or sister of yours, someone to whom you are committed, becomes the butt of a joke? And instead of standing up for your friend and refusing to participate, because you wanted the approval of the people around you, you joined in and ridiculed and derided someone who ought to have had your support at that moment? Probably the most painful example of taking up a reproach against a friend in all of history was Peter's denial of Jesus. But I cannot imagine anybody doing any better than Peter did. Now we do not have any right to put him down, but there is still something reprehensible about a man who sells out his friend, a man who curses and declares that he never knew him, and allows his friend to be hurt and set upon and have his reputation destroyed in front of others.

Verse 4 takes up the issue of whether or not we are the kind of people who are really committed to the things we say we believe. The first two phrases are two sides of the same coin. This is a man

In whose eyes a reprobate is despised, But who honors those who fear the Lord.

Some have suggested that despising reprobates is really unChristian, that in the New Testament we are instructed to love our enemies. Now that is certainly true, but loving our enemies is never an excuse for loving sin. Rather than successfully loving our enemies, most of us have never gotten to the point where we even hate sin enough. When we are faced with a reprobate, an ungodly, rebellious example, we envy it rather than hate it; we admire it rather than feel as God feels about human sin. There are many Christian businessmen who secretly wish they could be like their ruthless competitors who get ahead and make money and gain power, but their Christian morality keeps them from attacking as their competitor does. There are Christians who would like to have the freedom and the money to travel and experience the "jet set" thrills and they do not see the deadliness of that sort of life style. Perhaps you live in a neighborhood where there is a dominant, manipulative woman who seems to have success in running her family to meet her needs. Secretly you wish you could be like that, rather than living with the struggle of trying to follow the leadership of a husband who has a lot of hassles, who is not that sharp. Deep down we have never really learned to hate sin the way God does.

The other side of that coin is just as difficult -- to honor the righteous man. To genuinely honor the God--fearer, when he is a clod, is difficult when you are in the midst of dynamic and witty non-- Christians. Maybe even more pointed is the last statement of verse 4 about commitment to the truth, "He swears to his own hurt, and does not change." He stands by his commitments even when it gets expensive, even when he discovers that the thing he agreed to do is going to be much more difficult and hurtful than he thought at first. If you have agreed to spend time with your kids, do you renege when you have a chance to play tennis with your buddy? If you have agreed to go out with a boring cheapskate, do you break the date when "Prince Charming" asks you out? If you have agreed to sell your house for a certain price, do you maneuver your way out of the

agreement if somebody offers you more money? Are you the kind of person who, once you give your word, is committed to it, even if it gets expensive.

Verse 5 talks further about money.

He does not put out his money at interest, Nor does he take a bribe against the innocent.

"Money at interest" harkens back to the statements in the law about usury. This does not include, for instance, in our culture, a situation where both lender and borrower are financially secure, where they understand the risks involved and together they are taking an investment risk. That is not the issue at stake. David is talking about making money from vulnerable people, using a position of superiority to squeeze the weak and take financial advantage of them. Jews were forbidden to loan money at interest to other Jews. An analogous situation in our culture would be a request for financial help from a family member. Interest on loans to the poor was also forbidden. And certainly a bribe taken against anyone is wrong because it is lying, but it is also wrong because the man who needs your testimony, who needs your support for his character, is vulnerable to you. You are in a position to ruin his good name, perhaps, and you can take financial advantage of that. So it is always wrong to make money from needy people, your family, the poor, and those whose character is vulnerable. That is the issue he is addressing.

A question that ought to occur to us at this point is, "Why will these ten phrases, and these issues raised, if obeyed, result in the promise at the end of verse 5? Why will the individual who has learned to curb what he says and who handles money properly and who sticks by his commitments never be shaken?" Well, the thread that runs through that whole section, that ties all those together and makes a promise like this possible, is that the man that does all these things is a man of courage. Courage, learning Godly strength of heart, is what makes a man or woman unshakeable.

Money always promises a kind of security. It takes courage to turn down that offer and do what is right. It takes courage to suffer ostracism for the sake of defending and standing up for people who deserve to be defended. It takes courage to be in the lower place when you know you could undermine the people around you and make yourself look better. It takes courage to speak truth in your heart instead of rationalizing. That is the issue at stake. A man who has learned this kind of stout-heartedness never faces anything that can undermine him and hurt him and shake him. A line in one of John Fischer's songs, "Righteous Man," has always touched me when I hear it sung. It goes,

"I want to follow a different drum, Even if I'm the only one. "
There is something courageous about that.

"The screwtape Letters" is a book by C. S. Lewis, supposedly written by a "senior devil" to a "junior devil" on how to tempt some poor, benighted soul. It is written from the point of view of hell, so the advice is always exactly backwards. Here is part of Screwtape's advice concerning courage:

We [in hell] have made men proud of most vices, but not of cowardice. Whenever we have almost succeeded in doing so, the Enemy [God] permits a war or an earthquake or some other calamity, and at once courage becomes so obviously lovely and important even in human eyes that all our work is undone, and there is still at least one vice of which they feel genuine shame....

... This, indeed, is probably one of the Enemy's motives for creating a dangerous world- a world in which moral issues really come to the point. He sees as well as you do that courage is not simply one of the virtues, but the form of every virtue at the testing point, which means, at the point of highest reality. A chastity or honesty, or mercy, which yields to danger will be chaste or honest or merciful only on conditions. Pilate was merciful till it became risky.

As Screwtape points out, courage is at the very center of the life of faith. David is describing the same thing in this psalm: the man who has learned real courage is unshakeable.

We have not yet talked about verse 1. You will observe that David does not write in praise of human strength. Writers from Homer to Hitler have talked about the great value and impressiveness of human strength of heart, but we do not have David's version of that here. He did not sit down to write a psalm about that subject. He began by asking a question, and he ended up discovering these things. And the crucial first question he asked was,

O Lord, who may abide in Thy tent? Who may dwell on Thy holy hill?

The "tent" or the tabernacle of God was the place where Jews went to worship. It is the place where God was intimately present. (The "holy hill" is Mount Zion.) So the first important question David asked was, "Who is the man who can be at home in the presence of God?"

Do you have friends or members of your family with whom you are genuinely able to be yourself? Do you have a place where it is easy for you to be at home, where you can walk in in whatever clothes you happen to be wearing, take off your shoes, tell a joke, and be ignored or whatever and just feel pretty glad to be there? Do you know people you feel at home with? David is asking the question, "Who is the man who has that kind of relationship with God, who is so free to be himself that he is at home in God's presence?" Now when he asked that question he searched the Scriptures, I am sure. He thought through his experiences as King of Israel; he reflected on all that life had taught him, and he decided, "Well, as I think about it, the man who is at home in God's presence is the courageous man, the man of integrity, the righteous man. The two go together; people who know and love and belong to God are also people of strength and honesty and forthrightness and courage. Where I find one I expect to find the other."

Now the rest of Scripture answers for us the question of which is cause and which is effect. Scripture makes very clear that it is a love relationship with God that produces courage, not the other way around-- it is not people who set out to become powerful to dominate the scene, who then, having achieved that, present themselves to God for a relationship. That is never a point of view that has any ring of truth to it. It is the other people, the people who finally get tired of the way they are so they are willing to approach God and admit it and repent. They are willing to be themselves; they do not try to flatter God any longer; they do not try to be on their best behavior and put on fake manners and a mask of righteousness that they know is not true of them and then draw near to God. People who have given all that up and take themselves the way they really are before the Lord, people who let him love them with all their inadequacies, their needs, their shortcomings and their foulness and learn to be loved like that, people who learn to be at home where God is- those are the people who are made courageous.

David does not ask questions about people who know about God; he does not ask questions about people who know people who know God; he is not interested in people who have songs and literature and poems about God. The question he asks is, "Who can live with God? Who belongs in his presence?" We discover that the people who are at home with God, who have finally learned to be themselves, who do not fake it any longer, who admit who they are, who have embraced that kind of intimacy with God, curiously enough, are also made into people of courage, strength and integrity. And they are attractive to be around. In Revelation 21 we read about what it will be like some day when everything that impedes closeness to God will be taken away. We read that the dwelling place of God is with men, that he will wipe away tears from people's eyes, that he loves to know them and wants to be present in their midst.

If this morning you find yourself attracted either to the notion of intimacy with God, of wanting to be the sort of person who can live where God lives, or you long, perhaps, for a stable life for a life that is not subject to tragedy and hurt, that does not give way to hopelessness when you are under pressure, this psalm presents you with an invitation to come home. It presents you with an invitation to let go of everything. all the masks, all the games, that hide you, to let you be loved by God exactly as you are, and to finally come to the point where you are free enough to walk in and be his friend and not have to worry any more. You will discover that that kind of intimacy, that relationship, will produce strength, and make you courageous.

Lord, teach us what we need to know to break down the resistance we have to a love relationship with you. Let us learn that you love us exactly as we are, and that you are willing

to change us if we will give up our insistence on hiding and our insistence on formality and thinking we have something to offer. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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