

To Life

Series: Patterns For Prayer

by Steve Zeisler

We can't fail to see the significance of an ultimatum after the events of last weekend. The dictator of Iraq was given an ultimatum by the allies arrayed against him, but he appeared to assume that the ultimatum wasn't serious: that more negotiations were possible, discussions would continue, other questions could be asked, and so on. Of course, the ultimatum turned out to be absolute. It is an important lesson for us. We need to be reminded that at times we face ultimatums that will not be rescinded; in our personal lives as in international politics, there are some issues that cannot be negotiated beyond a certain point. Some decisions cannot be postponed. We must face the final ultimatum in the fact of our own mortality. "Man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment," as it says in Hebrews 9:27. When the day arrives that our lives are to end, the time for discussion is past.

Two options

Being destined to die, we have two options for understanding the human condition. Either this life-- the 70 or so years we are given-- is all there is, and we should maximize our experience here every hour of every day, investing everything in the advantages of this world; or this life is a preliminary to the eternal one, and our values must be centered in what is going to last forever, not in what is merely part of the preliminaries. Precisely because there is a deadline to human life, an ultimatum, we must choose one of these possibilities. We ought to take very seriously the end point, think hard and clearly about which is true, and make decisions about ourselves and our lives based on the fact that the last day will come.

You may remember Jesus' parable about the rich fool whose life was expanding, his enterprise succeeding, his riches growing. He was debating as to whether to build bigger barns or not and how he should go about it, telling himself all his advantages in this life. At the end of the parable, the Lord speaks to this man swelled with a sense of his own importance, and says, "You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?" (Luke 12:16-20.) The deadline has arrived, and the issue that has been before him all along has now run its course. It's too late to make decisions anymore. Who cares about whether bigger barns are built now?

Our mortality is the subject of Psalm 49. This is one of the great passages in the Bible that considers this issue. We've been talking about prayer together, using the Psalms as a pattern for prayer. Psalm 49 will not exactly serve us in that way. This is one of the handful of psalms that is not addressed to God. It's a sermon, a bit of wisdom literature that takes as its starting point the common experience of humanity. You don't need to be particularly familiar with the rest of the Bible-- the covenants made with Abraham, Moses, and David; the role of Israel and later the church -- in order to make sense of Psalm 49. As we will see in the opening verses, this psalm is written to everybody's experience. Everybody knows what it's like to see arrogant, wealthy people trust in themselves. And everyone knows what it's like for men and women to die. The second psalm we'll consider this morning, Psalm 16, is the passage to which we will turn to learn to pray about these things. Let's hear the sermon first. Psalm 49, verses 1-9:

**Hear this, all you peoples;
listen, all who live in this world,
both low and high,
rich and poor alike:
My mouth will speak words of wisdom;
the utterance from my heart will give understanding.
I will turn my ear to a proverb;
with the harp I will expound my riddle:**

Why should I fear when evil days come,
when wicked deceivers surround me--
those who trust in their wealth
and boast of their great riches?
No man can redeem the life of another
or give to God a ransom for him --
the ransom for a life is costly,
no payment is ever enough--
that he should live on forever
and not see decay.

The inadequacy of wealth

Everybody faces the end of their own existence. You cannot prolong life beyond its appointed end, regardless of how much money, power, or authority you have. The grandness of your life and your ability to control this world's goods cannot extend your life a second. No man can offer a sufficient ransom to God, saying, "Let this life and its experiences be unending for me; here is my payment to you." Yet, when we are confronted with someone who is rich and powerful, who trusts in and boasts in their riches, who is wicked and puts down the righteous, our temptation is to be afraid that they are going to get away with it. Ultimately the fear is that there is some advantage to riches beyond the external things. Clearly rich es are an advantage externally: you get to wear nicer clothes, drive nicer cars, live in a bigger house, vacation in more exotic places, and so on. You can boss people around at times and make the world more secure physically for yourself and your family. But the fear is that beyond the externals, what happens inside the heart can somehow be improved by wealth, and therefore that people of great means have spiritual as well as material advantages. That's the threat. But what the Scriptures teach very clearly is that wealth is no advantage either in character development or in the things of eternity.

I had some friends who were married about the same time as Prince Charles and Princess Diana of England. Do you remember that extraordinary royal wedding, attended to by the world, dripping with opulence in the clothes and jewels and so on ? It was a big deal! My friends who were married at about the same time were relatively poor by comparison. Instead of having an expensive and fine wedding cake, for instance, they had a carrot cake that was made by a group of their friends. And instead of being able to hire a professional photographer, they had some of their friends there with their own Instamatic cameras taking pictures that they would later collect in an album. So their wedding took place under much reduced circumstances in terms of wealth and external beauty. But by all accounts Prince Charles and Princess Diana are not particularly happily married. What they have gained in terms of relationship, what they have gained inwardly, what they have become as people, what they have been allowed to experience in terms of love for one another is shallow at best. Their wealth didn't give them any inward advantage, did it? And yet my friends who were married with the carrot cake and the Instamatic cameras, who went camping for their honeymoon, love each other more and more as the days go by, and something of real value and worth for the inner man and woman is taking place in their lives. Being rich is no advantage for the things that count.

In the same way, friendships that are made at high tea at the country club are not better friendships than those made in the neighborhood where you live. Friendship-- that quality of being able to commit yourself to someone and receive their commitment to you, to care for them, to hold them up, to be part of their lives-- comes to people in all walks of life. There is no particular advantage to being rich. In fact, the best friendships you will ever have are often made under times of extreme difficulty, like war. Serving together under the terrible circumstances of a theater of war may well produce deeper friendship than that which the country club set can ever discover in the most opulent circumstances

Foolish rationalizations

So we don't need to be afraid when an individual grows rich, especially if they are wicked, because in the long run there is no advantage in the inner man and there is no advantage in eternity. Now let's turn to verses 10 -- 12 and look at some of the rationalizations that are attempted in order to achieve immortality by people who have means.

**For all can see that wise men die;
the foolish and the senseless alike perish
and leave their wealth to others.
Their tombs will "main their houses forever,
their dwellings for endless generations,
though they had named lands after themselves.
But man, despite his riches, does not endure;
he is like the beasts that perish.**

There are two rationalizations suggested in these verses for the notion that wealth can really achieve immortality of some kind. The first is that in making careful arrangements to leave your wealth to other people, you-- that is, your influence and greatness -- will somehow extend beyond your death. But the problem is that while everybody -- the wise, the foolish, the senseless, the wealthy, the poor-- leaves something to the next generation, there's absolutely no way of maintaining your influence, because the next generation is as likely to be self-- serving and contradict all your wishes as not. The writer of Ecclesiastes commented on this subject: "I hated all the things I had toiled for under the sun, because I must leave them to the one who comes after me. And who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool? Yet he will have control over all the work into which I have poured my effort and skill under the sun. This too is meaningless." Everybody leaves behind their goods, but there is no way of guaranteeing that your influence, personality, ideas, and commitments will be taken up by the next generation. They will take your money, but who knows whether they will be wise or foolish? So you don't extend your influence by your legacy.

The other rationalization he suggests here is that by naming things after yourself you achieve immortality. When you etch your name into stone and create institutions that will go on bearing your name, somehow that will amount to a kind of immortality for you. But we know that, practically speaking, what happens is that the individual who does this is quickly forgotten, and the institution, the great estate, the company, or whatever it is that bears his name assumes an identity of its own. We are familiar with Stanford University, a powerful and self- important university near us. It turns out that it was named for Leland Stanford, Jr. Now, how often do you think of Leland Stanford, Jr. when you hear the name Stanford University? Never! The fact that his name is attached to that property and institution does nothing for the memory of the man. He has faded in history, and you have to work hard to discover anything about him. The point is that naming land after yourself doesn't achieve immortality.

Entombed forever

Furthermore, the place you will live forever, your eternal home, is the grave. "Their tombs will remain their houses forever ... though they had named lands after themselves." It's a hole in the ground that you end up in! And of course, graves deteriorate; the headstones crack, become weather- beaten and unreadable; and what is inside the tomb dries up. So you can't beat the ultimatum. The day is coming when everyone will die. Man is like the beasts that perish; our end is no different from that of singledcelled amoebas and every other kind of living thing. There is a day coming when the end will be upon us. The question is, what choices, values, and investments will we have made? What will we have believed before the day comes? What response will we have made to the ultimatum? Either this life is everything, or this life is a preliminary to something greater. If it is a preliminary to something greater, then we need to live it out with the values of eternity.

Verses 13-15:

**This is the kite of those who trust in themselves,
and of their followers, who approve their sayings. Selah**
(The term Selah indicates a pause for dramatic effect.)
**like sheep they are destined for the grave,
and death will feed on them**
[that is, death will shepherd them].
**The upright will rule over them in the morning,
their forms will decay [will be consumed, or eaten away] in the grave,
far from their princely mansions.
But God will redeem my life from the grave;**

he will surely take me to himself. Selah

The rationalizations are inadequate, and now he is going to tell us what really happens. The day will come when death in its hooded cowl and dark visage will come with a crook in its hand as a shepherd for the ones who die. It's an awful picture of what is beyond this life, being shepherded by something deadly, being consumed by the grave. Instead of being a good shepherd who provides for his sheep, this shepherd is consuming the sheep. Whatever there is beyond this life for those who are not redeemed by God will be determined by the consumptive shepherding of death itself. The picture here is drawn with great detail, but everything about it is frightening.

"But God"

The alternative is also not drawn in detail, but wonderfully alluded to here. The morning is coming, and then the upright shall rule. "But God will redeem my life from the grave; he will surely take me to himself." that's the other option: Beyond this life, there is a life to be lived in the presence of God that is worth living, and all the experiences of this life are preliminary to that dawn. The phrase "But God...." has been often noted by commentators as one of the great phrases in the Bible. But God, who is rich in mercy, has reversed the tragedy. But God will act in the place of all that is destructive, awful, and painful. We find the phrase here in verse 15. No man can pay the ransom; it is too costly. You will never garner enough money to be able to pay for the extension of your life. But there is one who can pay the ransom -- God himself has done so. Jesus Christ has given his life as a ransom for many, and therefore we may receive as a free gift life eternal, paid for by another.

Every now and then our family plays the game Monopoly. Over the years our children have become fairly accomplished at it. But they would be very foolish to think, just because they know how to play Monopoly-- which properties to land on, which to trade for, when to put houses on, and so on- that they know how to handle real money in the real world. The childhood experience of using play money has not prepared them to buy real property or use this world's goods in adulthood. The same is true of this life. It is merely the preliminary, the childhood, and the fact that we're good at having this world pay us off does not mean that we are in any sense prepared for the ultimate reality, eternity. All we've done is become good at something that doesn't last very long. If we haven't concerned ourselves with the living God and prepared ourselves for the morning, then we're no better off than children who know how to play Monopoly but don't know anything about adult life.

Banishing fear

Verses 16 and following take up the refrain again that we ought not be afraid:

**Do not be overawed when a man grows rich,
when the splendor of his house increases;
for he will take nothing with him when he dies,
his splendor will not descend with him.
Though while he lived he counted himself blessed --
and men praise you when you prosper-
he will join the generation of his fathers,
who will never see the light of life.
A man who has riches without understanding
is like the beasts that perish.**

What we need is understanding, insight, the knowledge that comes from God that directs us to what is really worth living for. Now, this psalm is primarily calling on us to take a negative action, if you will, in response to the things that have been discussed here. He is saying, don't be afraid. That is a good place to start. Stop fearing, stop assuming that people who have this world's goods have a real advantage over you who don't. Stop wishing that such wealth was yours; stop giving it more of a place than it deserves. But the realistic next question is, what should I do instead? Okay, I won't be afraid, I won't worship at the temple of mammon so much. I won't stay under the thumb of people who would push me around on this basis. But should I then hate this life because it's only a prelude to something greater? Should I reject everything about it, sell all my

worldly goods, and go off to a mountaintop to contemplate the stars and look forward to the end of this experience? The Bible never teaches that; in fact, it teaches the exact opposite. We aren't urged anywhere in scripture to hate this life.

What we are directed to do is to invest carefully, to let the values of eternity flood backward in time to us, to be caught up with those things, to be so sure of them that we begin to live on the basis of those truths right now. Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, talked about investment. "Do not store up for yourself treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." (Matthew 6:19-21.) We can use our time, our energy, our money, our relationships, our place of business, our home, our neighborhood -- all those things -- as beachheads for the enterprise of God. We can be investing in eternal treasures. We can care more about people and less about things. We can tell the truth instead of blathering on about the foolish silly, deceitful things that so often fill our conversation. We can use the spiritual gifts that God has given us to take care of what matters to him. We can see our own character and those of the people we care about formed into Christlikeness, because it is character that goes on forever. Those are the treasures that God values.

I mentioned earlier this morning that there are preschool children in this church who need ministry on Sunday mornings. We can be about that business. Maxine Bradford is a wonderful example, someone who has invested 27 years of her life, long hours, a lot of attention and prayer, her home, and her heart in Pioneer Girls. And I know Maxine; she wouldn't have traded a minute of it. She's given out more than anyone has ever given her. Yet at the same time she's been storing up treasures in heaven because it's worth doing. The deadline is approaching, the ultimatum is in place; and it's worth it to invest the hours and opportunities we have now in that which will last forever rather than that which lasts only for the moment.

Intimacy with God

Something else that we can do now without rejecting this life is to invite the intimate presence of God into our experience today. We're told in verse 15 that the morning will dawn and God will receive us to himself. "God will redeem my life... he will surely take me to himself." We don't have to wait until our death to experience that, twiddling our thumbs until we see him face to face as if there were no opportunity to experience his presence now. Paul says in Philippians 1:21, "For to me, to live is Christ [right now] and to die is [just more] gain." We can practice the presence and power of God now; we can enjoy fellowship with him now. Eternal life doesn't begin when we die; it begins now. We have abundant life because God is present.

On that basis I would ask you to turn to Psalm 16. This is the prayer lesson that we want to take home with us this morning. A prayer of David, Psalm 16 is about living life with the Lord God at the center of it. It's a wonderful statement of what it means to anticipate eternity and enjoy an eternal quality of life right now:

**Keep me safe, O God,
for in you I take refuge.
I said to the Lord, "You are my Lord;
apart from you I have no good thing."
As for the saints who are in the land,
they are the glorious ones in whom is all my delight.
The sorrows of those will increase
who run after other gods.
I will not pour out their libations of blood
or take up their names on my lips.
Lord, you have assigned me my portion and my cup;
you have made my lot secure.
(Verse 5 is better translated, "Lord, you are my portion [of my inheritance] and my cup....")
The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places;
surely I have a delightful inheritance.
I will praise the LORD, who counsels me;
even at night my heart instructs me.
I have set the Lord always before me.**

**Because he is at my right hand,
I will not be shaken.
Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices;
my body also will rest secure,
because you will not abandon me to the grave,
nor will you let your Holy One see decay.
You have made known to me the path of life;
you will fill me with joy in your presence,
with eternal pleasures at your right hand.**

The heart of this psalm is the statements made in verses 5 and 6. "You are my inheritance." Recall the inheritance of the Jews when they entered the Promised Land. The tribes were each given a portion of the land: Judah in the south, Dan in the north, others at various points on the coast or on the river, and so on. The Levites were the one tribe that was not given a physical inheritance. These priests of God were to find their inheritance in temple worship. Rather than land, they were given the job of maintaining the temple, attending to the Lord, and representing the people before him. That's something like what David has in mind here. He doesn't have any other place that means as much to him as his spiritual inheritance. God himself is the center of his life.

Living out convictions

He says in the first four verses leading up to 5 and 6 that he's made decisions about his life. His refuge or security, in verse 1, will be in the Lord. In verse 2 his value system will be centered on the living God, as if declaring, "I am not a double-minded man; I don't have love of money on the one hand and love of you on the other. I have no good thing apart from you."

He talks about valuing the glorious children of God more than the temptation to serve those who are wicked in verses 3 and 4. "They are the glorious ones in whom is all my delight... I will not pour out [the] libations of blood;" that is, the worship of those who run after other gods. Their sorrows are in direct contrast to the glory of the saints who are in the land.

In verse 7, he speaks of night thoughts as having God's counsel in them. You have almost certainly experienced times when you are awakened at night burdened by something. You can't shut your mind down, you can't seem to go to sleep, or if you go to sleep you wake up and can't go back to sleep. Your mind is racing. What is really important to you is taking control of your ability to sleep. What David is saying in verse 7 is that even at night his heart instructs him with the Lord's counsel, that he will apply the presence and thinking of God even to the wondering and wrestling that keep him awake at night. Verse 8 describes the Lord's being both before him and beside him. He is before him as his goal, and beside him as his defender at his right hand.

Lastly, in verses 9 to 11 we find the singing of joy, the praise of the tongue, the security of rest. "You will not abandon me to the grave." Sheol won't consume him; death won't shepherd him. He looks forward to the morning and realizes that because the Holy One, the Messiah, will not be abandoned, God won't abandon him either. So certain is he of his eternal future that he is partaking of it now. That is what this prayer is about: going back over the truth, applying it to this life, thinking of daily experience now as the beginning of what will take place in eternity. God has made known the path of life right now. "You will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand." We can invite eternity as it will be experienced then into our daily lives now. The sermon of Psalm 49 should call forth the prayer of Psalm 16. Let me close with a prayer of the Puritan era that can also encourage us to learn these truths.

Thou hast loved me everlastingly, unchangeably. May I love Thee as; I am loved. Thou hast given Thyself for me. May I give myself to Thee. Thou hast died for me. May I live to Thee. In every moment of my fume, in every movement of my mind, in every pulse of my heart may I never dally with the world and its allurements, but walk by Thy side, listen to Thy voice, be clothed with Thy graces and adorned with Thy righteousness. Amen.

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