

The Hungry Soul He Fills

In the name of him whom in love the Father sent to save the world, dear friends in Christ: The one hundred seventh Psalm, a portion of which we read earlier, is laid out in a fairly unusual way. It has what might be thought of as five distinct stanzas. The first four follow exactly the same pattern: a group of God's people go astray and manage to get themselves in dire straits, they suffer terribly as a result, they cry out to the Lord in their distress, the Lord hears their pleas and rescues them, and for his deliverance they ought to thank and praise the Lord. The fifth and final stanza (which is a bit longer than the first four) is a hymn of praise to God for his boundless mercy, his steadfast love, and his everlasting kindness.

The psalm is then nothing less than a meditation on life on in this fallen world. It's the story of our lives: how we often go astray, and when we do the Lord allows us to suffer some of the negative consequences of our bad decisions. It's precisely this suffering that leads us to realize that we went wrong. That leads to repentance. It also causes us to recognize our dependency on the Lord to whom we cry out for aid. And he comes through for us. He delivers those who trust in him and he brings them to a safe and secure place – if not in this life, then certainly in the next. For which we too ought to thank and praise the Lord.

In the first stanza of the psalm, which we spoke together earlier, we can easily detect overtones of the forty-year period that Israel spent in the wilderness after the exodus from Egypt. "Some wandered in desert wastes, finding no way to a city to dwell in; hungry and thirsty, their soul fainted within them." That pretty well sums it up.

But recall why Israel spent those forty years out there. It was a result of their unfaithfulness. The Lord had delivered them from slavery in Egypt. He took them to Mount Sinai where he gave them his Law and made his covenant with them. And then led them north on a straight course to the Promised Land. He told them to go in and take it; I'm giving it to you. But the people balked. They were afraid of the Canaanites who occupied the land. After all, they were heavily armed. They lived in strongly fortified cities. Some were rumored to be giants. And here we are a bunch of former slaves. We haven't got much in the way of weapons or armor. We don't know anything about fighting battles. The Lord told them never mind that. I will defeat your enemies for you. Go in and take what I'm giving you.

The people flatly refused. They didn't trust the Lord to give them what he promised. So the Lord said, fine, have it your way. Go back to the desert. Wander around out there. Live in your tents. If this generation won't trust me, the next one will. I'll see that you have food and water every day in a place that has neither so that you will learn to trust me.

Of course, part of what the Lord was doing was heightening their desire to have the very thing they'd refused: a permanent place to dwell, a land to call their own, solid homes in which raise their families, fertile fields to grow their crops, vineyards and fruit orchards, shady groves, lakes, rivers, and springs. They didn't have anything like that in the desert. No, it was gritty and hot, dust storms and sand, subsisting on manna and water with the occasional quail thrown in on the side – wandering from place to place out there for forty years, while all the old unfaithfuls died out and a new generation of believers replaced them.

Again, this is the story of our lives. It's like we sang in the hymn: "I'm but a stranger here ... earth is a desert drear." We are just passing through. Here we've got sorrow and heartache and loss. Here we live in sin and shame – and we have to deal with the sins of others. But nothing is permanent. No good thing lasts.

The Lord's purpose is to make us hunger and thirst for that better place: where sin is no more, where there are no sorrows or losses, where all good things do last – forever. The Lord is causing us to long deep in our hearts for the place that he has prepared for us; which, unfortunately the hymn repeatedly calls "heaven". Quite frankly, I don't know how this one made it into our Lutheran hymnal. Yes, a lot of people like it; but it's just wrong to say that heaven is my home. It's not. Heaven is where the spirits of those who died in faith are. But they aren't staying there. They are coming back to be reunited with their bodies when the Lord raises them on the Last Day. Our permanent home will be right here in the New Creation.

But that aside, at least the hymn gets part of it right: this present earth is not our permanent home. We *are* just passing through. And while we do, what is old and unfaithful in us is supposed to be dying out. We are to be putting to death the old nature through repentance for sin, as the Lord causes to be born and grow in us the new nature through his word of forgiveness in Christ Jesus and the Holy Spirit who works in us the faith to believe it. This Gospel message is the true Bread of Life from heaven that sustains us on the way. It's what for the present satisfies our hunger and thirst for the Lord's righteousness.

And this is necessary because we have the same problem that the Israelites did. The old sinful nature in you believes that attaining the goal of the genuine and lasting Promised Land is in some way up to you. This is why it sometimes happens that I'll talk to a lifelong Christian who's approaching the end, and I'll ask, "Are you sure that you will be in heaven with Jesus and those you love who have gone before you?" And the answer will be, "I hope so. I hope I'm good enough to make it." Even in those who don't express it, that fear and nagging doubt are still present. As long as the sinful nature is there, they must be.

What's worse though is that a majority of what calls itself Christianity actually teaches that salvation is in some way a joint effort: God does his part and you must do yours. Be it your decision for Jesus, your godly life that reflects your faith, your new obedience to Jesus whom you've made the Lord of your life (as if he wasn't the Lord before you crowned him king), or your satisfactions for sins that you've confessed and been absolved of *pending* your completion of some assigned task – in these and many other ways Christians are being taught that attaining the goal of the Promised Land is ultimately something that they must do for themselves.

And that is a true spiritual desert. I've heard and read the testimonies of many who lived there, always wondering, always worrying, forever doubting – despairing of themselves because they weren't living up to the standards that they were being told they had to achieve—that they could indeed achieve if only they had enough faith. They were left to conclude that they didn't have enough faith, and therefore that they could not be saved.

I remember listening to Harold Camping's radio program in which people could call in and ask questions. You remember Mr. Camping. He's the guy who kept predicting the date on which this world would end. He was wrong on multiple occasions. Another of his wrong teachings was that you knew you were truly a Christian when you lost all desire to sin. That was the litmus test. If you ever have a desire to do something wrong, you are no Christian and you cannot be saved. That's just insane. As long as you have a sinful nature, and you will as

long as you are in this life, you will have desires to sin. But not everyone knows that – especially if they're listening to false teachers like Harold Camping.

So, anyway, this guy calls in and says, "For fifteen years I've been praying as hard as I can that God will make me a Christian. It still hasn't happened. What more can I do?" And you could hear the terror and desperation in the man's voice. He was in agony. What does Harold tell him? "You'll just have to keep on praying. Maybe God will be merciful to you."

Really? "*Maybe* God will be merciful?" What the man needed to hear was that he *was* a Christian. He did believe in Jesus. He believed in Christ's work of atonement on the cross. That's why he wanted to be a Christian. He just didn't believe that believing in Christ was enough because that's what he'd been taught. And ol' Hal just left the poor guy dying in the desert with the venom of the devil's lies burning in his flesh.

We who are blessed by God to be part of the confessional Lutheran Church where the pure unadulterated Gospel is proclaimed very often don't realize just how good we've got it. It's been my experience that the most dedicated Lutherans are those who have spent some time in that spiritual wasteland hungering and thirsting for the righteousness of Christ which is imputed by faith alone in his accomplished work. Once they find it, once their starving souls are filled with the satisfying truth that Jesus did it all, they never want to go back to that desert again.

The danger for us is that we might wander away from it as many do; some through neglect of the means of grace offered in corporate worship, others because they think they've found something better: a church that gratifies the sinful nature because it teaches that you do have a part to play in attaining salvation. I pray that it doesn't happen to any of us, that none of us wanders from the truth. But if it does, I pray the Lord will cause that person to hunger and thirst for the righteousness of Christ. For he satisfies the longing soul, and the hungry soul he fills with good things. Therefore, let us give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, and his steadfast love endures forever! In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!