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WHAT MIGHT HAVE BEEN

Psalm 81

By

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Lesson 16: Psalms

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“For of all sad words of tongue or pen,
The saddest are these: ‘It might have been.’”
(John Greenleaf Whittier, in *Bartlett’s Familiar Quotations* [Little, Brown and Company, 13th ed.], p. 527.)

I am a saver and I hate to see waste. Once when I was in the Coast Guard, we had steaks for dinner, which was great. The sad thing was, someone had ordered too many steaks. The mess crew was piling three or four steaks on each man’s plate, trying to get rid of them. Since you couldn’t take food from the mess hall, the trash cans were full of wasted steaks. There were many poor kids less than two miles from the base who had probably never even tasted a steak. It was sad.

But worse than wasted steaks are wasted lives. Think of the tremendous potential God puts in every life! Each life can count for God’s purpose. Because of that fact, it is especially sad to see a wasted life.

God is in the business of recycling wasted lives. When a person trusts in Jesus Christ as Savior, there is new hope: sins are washed away, there is a new creature in Jesus Christ, and as the person lives under the Lordship of Christ, God’s potential is unfolded.

The person could become like the Apostle Paul, transformed from a life of hatred and violence into the greatest missionary and leader in the early church. He could become like Augustine, saved from a life of moral impurity to become the man who had the greatest influence in the first 1,500 years of the church, apart from the Lord Himself and the authors of Scripture. He could become like John Newton, the debauched slave-trader who was transformed into a godly pastor and hymn writer, author of “Amazing Grace.”

Or, that potential can be wasted. History is strewn with the wreckage of those who made a profession of faith in Jesus Christ, but then made shipwreck of their faith (1 Tim. 1:19). I hear all the time of pastors who are out of the ministry due to moral failure. I hear of Christians who once were zealous for the Lord who have cooled off and are living for the things of the world. Their lives are wasted, as far as the kingdom of God is concerned. As you examine the wreckage, you can't help but think about what might have been.

You may say, "It doesn't do any good to lament over what might have been. That's like crying over spilled milk." But the Bible shows us that even God sometimes laments over what might have been. It's instructive for us to pause at times to examine the wreckage of the wasted lives of God's people so that we avoid their mistakes.

In Psalm 81, God laments over what might have been. As He ponders the history of Israel, His chosen people, God mourns over what He could have done for them and through them, if only they had obeyed Him. It's an inscrutable mystery that while God is all-powerful and nothing can thwart His sovereign purpose, at the same time He limits His power and blessing to the obedience of His people. As we join the Lord in observing the wreckage of these wasted lives, the message to us is:

The way to avoid a wasted life is
to walk in obedience to the Lord.

BACKGROUND:

To understand this psalm, we need to understand the setting. The psalm was to be sung at a feast day (81:3), which most scholars think was the Feast of Tabernacles. The seventh month was ushered in with the blowing of the ram's horn (Num. 29:1). On the tenth day was the Day of Atonement, and on the fifteenth day, at the full moon (81:3), began the Feast of Tabernacles or Booths.

The Feast of Tabernacles was celebrated for seven days. The people made little booths and lived in them. The focus of the celebration was to remind Israel of their redemption from Egypt and of God's protection and sustenance in the wilderness when they

did not live in homes. It was also a time for giving thanks for the harvest which had just ended. Following upon the Day of Atonement as it did, the feast was a time of celebrating the joy of forgiveness and reconciliation with God and His bountiful provisions for His people. It was the most joyous of the Jewish feasts. The rabbis used to say that one who had not witnessed the celebration of this feast did not know what joy was (J. J. Stewart Perowne, *The Book of Psalms* [Zondervan], 11:96).

If you're tracking with me, you may be wondering, "Why did this fellow, Asaph, write a psalm like this to be sung at a festival like that? Was he some sort of spoilsport? When everybody is having a joyous time celebrating the Feast of Tabernacles, why have them sing a song that focuses on the dismal record of disobedience of God's people?"

It seems to me that the answer is that the psalmist realized that it is possible for God's people to go through the motions of religion outwardly, and yet inwardly to have hearts that are stubborn, self-willed, and disobedient to the Lord God. The psalmist is saying, "Yes, come, rejoice and celebrate the feast. But in your rejoicing, remember the past. Remember what might have been, if only God's people had obeyed. And let that remembrance strike a solemn note in your rejoicing, so that you do not repeat their mistake."

As we examine the psalm, we need to keep this historical setting before us. It's possible for any of us to come and sing praises to God and go through all the outward motions of religion, and yet to be living in disobedience to our God. The psalmist is saying, "Beware! The way to avoid a wasted life is to walk in obedience to God."

1. Wasted potential is the result of disobedience to God.
 - A. Religious people can disobey God.

Even though Israel was God's chosen people and He had miraculously delivered them from Egypt, they continually sinned against Him (81:11). On two occasions, one early and one late in their journey from Egypt to Canaan, the Israelites quarreled with Moses because there was no water (Exod. 17:7; Num. 20:13). Those two places were named "Meribah," which means "quarrel."

But their real quarrel was not with Moses, but with God who had led them into these places. After He had done the greatest miracle in delivering them from Egypt, couldn't they trust Him to do the lesser miracle in providing for their needs in the wilderness?

But we do the same thing when we grumble about our trials. God has done the greatest thing for us in saving us from bondage to sin. Can't we trust that He will provide for our other needs as well? All grumbling is really against the sovereign God. Instead of affirming His goodness toward us in Christ, it attributes evil neglect to Him.

Israel was also guilty of idolatry (81:9). Although the commandment of God was clear, the people made the golden calf and bowed before it. Later, they adopted many of the false gods of the land. Although our idolatries may be more subtle, in that few American Christians make statues to bow down to or pray to, idolatry is no less rampant among us. Christians put self, pleasure, money, power, and a host of other gods before the living and true God. It is shocking to me that studies have shown that there is virtually no difference between Christians and non-Christians in either the amount (about 21 hours per week) or content of their TV viewing habits. And yet, most American Christians would protest if you told them that they worshiped idols!

Furthermore, God laments that His people did not listen to Him with a view to obedience (81:8, 11, 13). God told them how to live, but they ignored Him and lived as they wanted to ("walk in their own devices," 81:12) or as the pagans around them lived. In our day, God has spoken clearly to His people through His Word. It tells us how to live in this evil world so as to please God and avoid the things which would destroy us. But when Christians spend perhaps no more than one hour a week reading their Bibles and 21 hours watching TV, is it any wonder that our lives look more like those we see on TV than like those prescribed in God's Word?

What is the result when people disobey God?

B. The result of disobedience is wasted potential.

God says, "I gave them over to the stubbornness of their heart to walk in their own devices" (81:12). These are chilling

words! Calvin (*Calvin's Commentaries*, [Associated Publishers & Authors], 2:727) says, "Nothing ... is more to be dreaded" Spurgeon comments, "No punishment is more just or more severe than this.... It were better to be given up to lions than to our hearts' lust" (*Treasury of David*, [Baker], IV:30). It reminds us of Romans 1, where Paul shows how God gave wicked people over to their own lusts (Rom. 1:24, 26).

God did what parents sometimes must do. When your children insist on having their own way and in going against your commands, there comes a point where finally you say, "O.K. Go ahead and do it, but you will pay the consequences." You know that it's not for their good, but sometimes there is no other choice. God knew that they would not experience His blessings in the land of promise, but finally He said, "Have it your way!" That stubborn generation died in the wilderness.

At this point we need to ask an important question: Why did Israel want to disobey God? *Why does anyone want to disobey God?* If disobedience results in wasted lives, why do it? The answer is:

- C. Religious people disobey God because it seems like disobedience will get them where they want to go.

Sin deceives us into thinking that we can get what we want apart from God. What did Israel want? The comforts of life. It was a bad goal, but a common one among fallen, self-centered sinners. God's Word is clear that we should seek first His kingdom and righteousness, and He will take care of our comfort needs. But we often get it backwards and seek first our own fulfillment.

Israel had been slaves in Egypt, so they called out to God for deliverance (81:7). God answered and miraculously brought them out of Egypt. Then they went into the wilderness and ran out of water. God was testing them (81:7) to see whether they would obey Him. He had done the big thing; could they trust Him for this lesser thing?

Obedience is often initially more difficult but it results in God's blessing in the long run. Disobedience usually looks like a quick fix to get what we want, but leads to ruin. At every point Israel was inclined to take the easy route back to slavery rather than to endure the discomforts of going God's way which ultimately

would lead them to His promised land. They were deceived into thinking that their disobedience would get them where they wanted to go.

There is a principle in God's Word that goes like this: *When you disobey God, you don't get where you want to go, and you pay the fare.* It won't seem so at first. At first everything seems great. But disobedience is deceptive, because ultimately it does not get you where you want to go, and you pay the fare anyway!

We see this in the life of Jonah. God told Jonah, "Go to Ninevah and cry against it." Jonah reasoned, "The Assyrians are the enemies of Israel. If I go and preach to them, they might repent. If they repent, God probably will forgive them. I don't want that to happen to our enemies, so I'm going to Tarshish." We read, "So he went down to Joppa, found a ship which was going to Tarshish, paid the fare, and went down into it to go with them to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord" (Jonah 1:3).

You know the rest of the story. He paid the fare and thought it would get him where he wanted to go, but it didn't. He wound up in the belly of the fish and was vomited up back on the beach in Israel. (You can't keep a good man down!) When you disobey God, you don't get where you want to go and you pay the fare.

But that's not the end of the story. The next verse says, "Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time ..." (Jonah 3:1). *The second time!* God is the God of the second chance! When we sin, it doesn't get us where we want to go, and we pay the fare. If we keep disobeying, we will waste our lives. But God is abundantly gracious. He disciplines us by letting us pay the consequences of our sin. But His purpose is not to discard us, but to restore and bless us. And thus we read, "The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time."

And, in our psalm, we read of God's discipline in giving His people over to the stubbornness of their hearts (81:12). But we also read of His abundant grace in the verses that follow (81:13-16). These verses show that ...

2. Fulfilled potential comes through walking in obedience to God.

God is waiting to pour out His richest blessings if we will obey Him. We need to feel the longing of God's heart in these verses. He takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but would rather that he should turn from his ways and live (Ezek. 18:23). Like any loving father, it pains God to discipline His children. But His love will not let those who are truly His children continue in sin without chastening them (Heb. 12:5-11).

One reason we have trouble with obedience is because we have a faulty concept of God. Satan tempted Eve by getting her to think that God is not really good. "He's withholding that which you need to be really happy!" We often buy his same line, that God is harsh, austere, and unloving. Satan whispers, "God doesn't want you to enjoy yourself." But our psalm shows us that ...

- A. The goodness of God is the motive for obedience (81:6-10).

The psalmist reviews how God delivered Israel from bondage to Egypt. They were in trouble and called out, and He answered them (81:7). Then he goes on to list the requirement that the people listen to and worship God alone. At the climax of the section, when you expect to hear the rest of the Ten Commandments, you hear instead, "Open your mouth wide and I will fill it" (81:10).

There's the goodness and grace of our God! He saved us from bondage to sin and has commanded us to walk in His ways. Why? To take away our fun? No! So that He can fill us with His blessings! Moses told Israel that God commanded these things "for our good always and for our survival" (Deut. 6:24). God's commandments are like the traffic laws. They are not designed to take away your fun, although you may sometimes think so. They're designed to protect you and everyone on the road from danger and death. If everyone obeyed those laws, there would be no fatal accidents. We violate them to our own peril. God's laws stem from His goodness. He wants to bless us. That should motivate us to obey Him.

- B. The blessings of God are the result of obedience (81:10, 14-16).

If we will obey God, He will bless us. As Matthew Henry puts it, "There is enough in God to fill our treasures (Prov. 8:21), to replenish every hungry soul (Jer. 31:25), to supply all our wants, to

answer all our desires, and to make us completely happy" (*Matthew Henry's Commentary* [Revell], 3:549). Note briefly three ways God blesses when we obey:

(1) *Satisfied hunger* (81:10): "Open your mouth wide and I will fill it." In California, we had a bird feeder that attracted a baby flicker and its mother. The baby (which looked the same size as the mother) would sit right there in front of the birdseed and squawk with its mouth open. The mother would feed herself for a minute and then she would take a beak-full of seed and stuff it down that open mouth. The young bird would be quiet for a few seconds and then would squawk again. I would have thought that the mother bird would get tired and say, "There's the food. Feed yourself!" But the baby kept opening his beak and the mother kept filling it.

That's the picture here. God will fill the open mouth. The problem is, we don't open our mouths. We think we can operate without the Lord, so we don't look to Him to fill us. We get self-sufficient and aren't aware of our total need for God.

Jesus said, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied" (Matt. 5:6). Are you hungry? Is your mouth open? I affirm from my own walk with God what Spurgeon said: "Are you growing conscious of your own power? If so, pray against it with all your might. A much better thing is to become conscious of your own weakness. You will not open your mouth wide if you do not realize how weak you are. If you feel that you are strong, you will cease to cry to God for strength" (*Spurgeon's Expository Encyclopedia* [Baker], 12:377). This verse impressed George Muller as a young man and became one of the foundational promises upon which he saw God build five orphanages and support over 10,000 orphans in response to prayer alone. The same God wants to satisfy your hunger. Is your mouth open toward Him?

(2) *Subdued enemies* (81:14): I hope that no one is seeking your life physically! But we all battle a number of enemies of the soul that seek to do us in spiritually: pride, envy, lust, anger, anxiety, foul speech, selfishness, greed, and others. God will subdue those enemies as we obey Him. There may be fierce battles; such enemies don't give up easily. But if we would listen to God, He would turn His hand against these adversaries.

(3) *Sweetness in adversity* (81:16): If His people will obey, God promises to satisfy them with honey from the rock. Rocks are harsh, unpromising things when it comes to feeding the hungry. The desert where Israel wandered had a lot of rocks and not much else. Who would expect anything satisfying from a rock? But God can bring honey from the rock to satisfy His people. The bees would go into the cracks of the rocks and store their sweet honey which oozed out. It's a picture of how the Lord can bring sweetness and nourishment for His people even out of adversity. He doesn't always take away the rocks, but He can make them drip with honey.

Conclusion

The way to avoid a wasted life is to walk in obedience to the Lord. Notice all the occurrences of the word "would" in 81:13-16. It's a word of desire and contingency. It shows God's desire to bless, if only His people would obey. It shows *what might have been*.

But also, it shows *what can be*. This psalm is here not just to get us to look back and lament. It's here to get us to look ahead with hope. Even though we may grieve over wasted years in the past when we disobeyed the Lord, if we will turn from our sin and begin to obey Him now, He *will* feed us with the finest of the wheat. He *will* satisfy us with honey from the rock. He is gracious and compassionate. He forgives all our sin through Christ when we turn to Him.

Discussion Questions

1. Some Christians view obedience as "legalism" and put it in opposition to God's grace. Why is this fallacious?
2. Is it legalism to obey God when we don't feel like it?
3. Spurgeon says that a good test of a person's spiritual maturity is his own sense of his spiritual poverty. What does he mean? What are the implications of this?

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