

Find Out for Yourself

Psalm 34 *Find out for yourself how good the Lord is.* (Today's English Version)

Three verses of Psalm 34 especially draw my attention.

The first is verse 8: *O taste and see that the Lord is good; happy are those who take refuge in God.*" A better and more vivid translation is: *Find out for yourself how good the Lord is.*(TEV) In recent years, this has become a very important spiritual insight for me. Taste and see. Find out for yourself. Don't take someone else's word for it. Try living by faith and see what you come up with. This seems to be the theme verse for the whole psalm. It expresses the biblical meaning of "faith." Faith is not a head-trip. Faith is not clinging to ideas about God or Jesus or the Bible or anything else, even good ideas. I'm afraid that is how Christianity has come to be presented and practiced--ideas, doctrines, theologies, mental formations. Our thinking is very important, but faith has to do with how we live.

The Christian life, to a great extent, has been reduced to belonging to and supporting a religious institution. Many churches these days are built around these two things: believe a prescribed set of religious ideas that make you feel righteous, and support the institutional structure. All churches fall victim to this path to some degree. Meanwhile, people go hungry for something real, something that is grounded in their own lives and experience. And the biblical meaning of faith is lost, that is, living one's life with a true openness to God's presence, care, and leading.

For the psalmist, faith means seeking God's goodness and taking refuge in God. Taking refuge does not mean running away from life or from ourselves. It means rooting and grounding our lives in the very source of life itself—God. Faith is not "blind faith." Faith is EXPERIENCE. It is discovering within the sometimes confusing and painful experiences of our lives the presence of God and God's power and love. Taste and see that God is good. Do it for yourself. Don't take someone's word for it. Don't take MY word for it! This is the main thing that makes me nervous about sermons. They are important. Yet the point is not to cling to the words of someone else, but to let those words point us to our own lives, our own experience, our own faith. Don't live vicariously through someone else, even some winsome religious leader. Make the life of faith your own. Those who take refuge in God, who root their lives in God, will experience a happiness, a joy that goes deeper than circumstances of suffering or pleasure that come and go.

It is no wonder that young people often abandon the church or institutional religion. When we define the religious or spiritual life as having the right religious ideas and supporting the institution of the church, no full-blooded young person is going to be content with that for very long. A young woman in her late teens wrote to me not long ago. She is a compassionate human being, deeply concerned about human rights and justice issues. She confessed to me that she really felt that she was an agnostic. An agnostic is one who does not claim to know about God. I wrote back: "Good! That means you are thinking for yourself, that your faith will be your own." I think that many young people sense that Jesus was about life as an adventure in faith, not hunkering down, clutching a few religious ideas, and serving on a couple of committees.

The Church of the Covenant was born out of this understanding of faith. When we talk about faith as an inward journey of prayer and self-understanding, and an outward journey of discovering and doing what we feel God is calling us to do with our unique lives, we are talking about taking responsibility for our own spiritual lives. It is about finding out for ourselves how good God is. We don't come here expecting someone to provide us with all the answers or to do our thinking for us or to tell us what to do. If we do come with such expectations, we are soon disappointed. We assume that each of us is capable of undertaking a personal spiritual life, discovering for ourselves our relationship with God and living out of that relationship to the best of our ability and insight. What we offer is the opportunity to make a commitment to "find out for ourselves" that God is good. And we work with a minimal set of spiritual disciplines, or practices, that can keep us on the journey and help us awaken more and more to our own lives in relation to God, other people, ourselves, and the world.

When the psalm says taste and see that God is good, it doesn't mean that we find God's goodness only in the pleasant experiences of life. More important is to find God's goodness in the experiences that bring suffering. This is the second thing that stood out for me in Psalm 34. It is in verse 6: *This poor soul cried, and was heard by the Lord, and was saved from every trouble.* If we think God is only present in the things that

make us feel good, then we will have a real crisis of faith. We will run from things that are difficult and sink into despair when something painful happens. The psalm encourages us to have a wide-open heart, open to all experiences in our lives, the good and positive things, and the things that bring struggle or pain.

Later in the psalm, in verse 19, we read these words: *Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the Lord rescues them from them all.* In the version of the psalm we just sang, I wrote it this way: *Even the faithful will suffer, but God will bring them through.* If we are on the journey of faith, working with our spiritual practices, we will experience difficulties and suffering like any other member of the human family. We are not exempted from painful experiences. Recently in the Chrysalis Mission Group, we listened to the accountability report of one of our members. The reports we share with each other can be seen as sharing what we are discovering as we try to find out for ourselves the goodness of God. This report spoke of the spiritual work of receiving the difficult and sometimes overwhelming experiences of our lives so that they give insight into our own hearts, so that they teach us what love truly is about, and so that they open us to community.

About three years ago, there was a man who came occasionally to the Festival Center for the noon prayers. He lived in the neighborhood and had a far more challenging life than most of us. Usually he was very quiet, occasionally offering a prayer. That day we were reading together the words of Psalm 34. After the time of silent reflection, he was the first to respond. He called attention to verse 6: *This poor soul cried, and was heard by the Lord, and was saved from every trouble.* That's what I've experienced, he said. That's me. To learn what faith means in experiences of struggle and suffering, we can be taught by those who are poor or terribly sick or wounded by life. Somehow at the depth of their pain and difficulty, they touch a bedrock of gratitude and joy.

The third thing that stood out for me in the psalm has to do with verse 5: *Look to God, and be radiant; so your faces shall never be ashamed.* Looking to God makes us shine! Looking to God means we never need to feel ashamed! Kaye describes how her mother looked a few moments before she died. Kaye and her sister had gone into the kitchen for just a brief time. When Kaye came back into the living room where Mildred lay in her hospital bed, she saw that her mother's face had become radiant and completely at peace. "You look beautiful, Mom," said Kaye. She was looking to God. All the strain of her life, all of what might have caused her any shame, fear, guilt, or regret had evaporated.

We can not only die this way; we can live this way. Looking to God means to turn our living toward our spiritual life as the most important dimension of our lives. It is making our connectedness with God the core of what we do and what we seek. It means living the journey of faith in its inward and outward dimensions, tasting and seeing, finding out for ourselves. We are not living to please people or to meet society's expectations. Nor are we living out of fear and guilt. We are recognizing and exploring and deepening the relationship with God that is at the center of our being. And through that kind of journey, which includes moments of struggle, discouragement, and bewilderment, our face nevertheless shines. It is the reflection, the image of God in us.

No shame. I'm not talking about the shame or guilt that is appropriate to our violent, greedy, self-centered actions as persons, societies, and a human family. I'm talking about being ashamed of our selves, our BEING. Psychological or spiritual shame. Christianity is not meant to be a religion of that kind of shame and guilt. It has been made into that. Some of us have felt the sting of religion used as an instrument of instilling shame and guilt. The psalm, however, declares what is most basic to the whole of scripture, that we are made not to live in shame but in joy and freedom. This comes from our relationship with God who made us and loves us, who seeks our well-being and calls us to be the unique and precious persons we were made to be.

The spiritual life is not about lofty religious ideas or other-worldly ecstasies. It is about paying attention to our lives, living with growing awareness of life around us and in us. It is about tasting and seeing that God is good, even in the pain and struggle of life. The life of faith is about letting our faces shine as we look more and more to God within the fabric of our lives and relationships and experiences. And it is about dropping the shame that inhibits our living fully the life God has given us to live. The life of faith is about finding out for yourself how good God is.