

Rejoice in Salvation
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Psalm 13

How long, O Lord? Will you forget me for ever?
How long will you hide your face from me?
How long must I bear pain in my soul,
and have sorrow in my heart all day long?
How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?

Consider and answer me, O Lord my God!
Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep the sleep of death,
and my enemy will say, 'I have prevailed';
my foes will rejoice because I am shaken.

But I trusted in your steadfast love;
my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.
I will sing to the Lord,
because he has dealt bountifully with me.

Romans 6:12-23

Therefore, do not let sin exercise dominion in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions. No longer present your members to sin as instruments of wickedness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and present your members to God as instruments of righteousness. For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.

What then? Should we sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness? But thanks be to God that you, having once been slaves of sin, have become obedient from the heart to the form of teaching to which you were entrusted, and that you, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness. I am speaking in human terms because of your natural limitations. For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to greater and greater iniquity, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness for sanctification.

When you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. So what advantage did you then get from the things of which you now are ashamed? The end of those things is death. But now that you have been freed from sin and enslaved to God, the advantage you get is sanctification. The end is eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Matthew 10:40-42

'Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet's reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous; and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.'

In my house growing up, there were a number of unconventional words that were considered off-limits, “dirty” words said in a whisper, if at all. One of them ... was “exercise.” Exercise was something you did as penance, for punishment, the result of enjoying yourself too much. The concept of exercise as fun was foreign; the idea of exercise serving a long-term payoff was not thought of. While the media, and my doctors, have made abundantly clear all the health benefits of getting out and moving, there is still a part of me that resists exercise, that thinks running a mile is akin to self-flagellation. In Paul’s letter to the believers in Rome, he takes on the challenge of convincing them that living righteously now will have as its reward eternal life. Not quite the same, and yet...

The language Paul uses includes a taboo word, as well. To our modern ears, “slavery” is that word. We are ashamed to say it, ashamed of the history of our country tied to that word. As a nation, that shame is befitting for we know people are not property and we trust that God made us all equal. We are ashamed that our forefathers participated in slavery, that they did not see that people are not property, that some of them fought to uphold the practice of slavery even after others had begun to realize the wrongness of their own actions and spread the word that slavery was right for no one. Unfortunately, in the time of Paul, if anyone saw the wrongness of slavery, they either did not speak out or were silenced. And so, slavery was simply a part of life back then and served Paul as a metaphor which all would understand, especially those in the early church who were themselves slaves. “Some were born as slaves, some were sent into slavery through military conquest, and some even sold themselves to pay off debts.”¹

So to Paul the idea of slavery simply represented to whom, or to what, you pledged your loyalty. As he saw it, you could either be a slave to sin or a slave to God. You have heard the words of Jesus from the gospel of Matthew that “no one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other.” Jesus was talking about choosing God versus wealth but it would be just as appropriate to substitute sin for wealth. Through God’s gift of free will, we have the freedom to choose which master we will serve - God or sin. If we choose God, “we have been freed from sin [and] the advantage [we] get is sanctification. The end is eternal life.” If we choose sin, if we choose “those things of which [we] are now ashamed...the end of those things is death.”

So why on earth do we choose to follow anything or anyone but God? What is it about sin that seems more fun than righteousness? Is it the “feel good” experience? We can still feel good doing the right thing, and it’s a longer lasting “feel good,” too. Is it the pleasure of rebellion? Perhaps. As a kid who always did what she was told, a veritable goody-two-shoes, rebellion had a certain appeal. But maybe it’s the pleasure of independence. Like I said, I always did what I was told and in my life, I came

¹ *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 3*, p. 185.

to a point when I didn't want to do what I was told more than I wanted to do what *I* wanted to do. My form of rebellion was my independence. I chose what I wanted to do and who I wanted to be, still acting responsibly but doing so because *I* chose to do so.

We, as a society and as human beings, view dependence as negative - all the way back to Adam and Eve. This struggle against dependence, *this* is original sin. We have been struggling between the desire to be independent from God and the desire to reunite with God, "in dependence," since then. How many of you, as a child, in a fit after being told what to do (or what not to do), said, "You're not the boss of me!?" What fuels this need for independence? Well, there's the catch - we need to be independent - it's what growth and maturing is all about. Those who don't become independent don't fare well. And God *wants* us to grow into our God-given gifts and talents and abilities, using them in ways unique to us. Hear it, though: *God-given* gifts and talents and abilities. Independence, free will - both gifts from God, meaning our created beings are naturally, originally dependent on God. I consider myself an independent and able woman and yet, even though my dad died almost two years ago, I still catch myself thinking, "I should call him and ask him..."

My parents raised me to be independent so I could provide for myself and for my family. That doesn't change the fact that I still depend on that relationship. Like I said, my way of being independent was making my own choices rather than do what I was told, but still doing so based on the moral foundation laid by my parents and by my faith - good independence. Like with God, we can choose to stay loosely tethered; we can bring about good, counting on God to help us. When we pull away, when we are separate in ways that do *not* promote good, we are in a state of sin, for sin is that state of being apart from God.

Even Paul, pillar of our faith, had times when he pulled away from God. Later in the same letter to the Romans, he writes, "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate." Sometimes we find ourselves doing those things we hate out of habit. Even when we do choose righteousness, habit sometimes brings us back to our ways of making bad decisions or, at the very least, not the better decision.

In some cases, our allegiances are easy to choose or not even a choice. For many of us, we first have to make a choice, must pick and choose to whom to pledge our loyalty when we take a job, paid or volunteer, especially when we are choosing to leave one job for another. Sometimes we return to our old ways. We can think of sin as the bad boss at the old job, the tyrant. We've committed to work on God's team; we feel good when we're at work, the benefits are great, and the retirement plan is out-of-this-world. And yet, one morning you're in the car and habit causes you to turn down the streets to the old job. With sin, you get as far as walking in, sitting down at your old desk, doing the work you hated,

in the same depressing environment, and dreading seeing your demeaning boss and unethical co-workers because they only bring you down. This scenario is not so far-fetched. Habit is a funny thing like that; we can continue doing something that is not good for us, that brings us down, even that hurts us, simply because it is familiar. Old habits, as they say, die hard.

And sometimes in our lives we intentionally and consciously choose to separate from God. There's a song on the radio now by a woman named Avril Lavigne whose lyrics are a tad unsavory for a pulpit so I've cleaned them up. She sings, "all my life I've been good but now I'm thinking, what the heck? All I want is to mess around and I don't really care about if you love me, if you hate me." These are words that speak to that rebellious goody-two-shoes inside of me. I find them creeping into my mind especially when I've had a rough day. Why should I let the person who waited until the very end of the merge to try to get over into my lane? Why should I respond with grace to the rude clerk? If I had a bad day, so can they, I justify. Back when I was a kid, if I felt bad about the way a popular kid treated me, why should I feel bad about treating badly someone even lower on the social totem pole? Sometimes, I will admit, my thoughts made, and make, their way into my actions.

We all let sin exercise dominion, whether out of habit or by choice. We do the things of which we are ashamed. It is in those times that we can be grateful that our God is a God of second and third and seventy-third chances. When we have pulled away from God, we are like the psalmist, feeling that God must certainly have forgotten us when we forgot God. We wonder "how long" we will be separated from God. And then our foundation in faith, in the faith we share, can remind us that we, like the psalmist, can trust in God's steadfast love and be freed to rejoice in salvation.

Then we can recognize what Paul wishes the Romans, and us, to see: that independence isn't all it's cracked up to be. When we pledge loyalty to God, God like the good boss, God like a loving parent, joins us so we are not alone in anything we do. We are freed from the burdens of fierce independence. When we let go of all the worries and burdens that come with assuming complete independence, we make room for joy. When we let go of all the burdens that come with assuming our need to be completely independent from God, and from others, we make room to be in communion, in community with others. With that communion and community comes relief from separation and also comes support. We were made for such community and support. Remember in Genesis that God created a woman, a partner, for the man, because it was not good that he was alone, because he needed a helpmate, someone to share life with. We are meant to open ourselves to others and to God. When we open ourselves to all that God desires to give us, we receive "the free gift of God...eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." We receive salvation.

These are all connected, opening ourselves to others, opening ourselves to God, and receiving salvation. We hear confirmation of this in Matthew. “Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous; and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple - truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.”

If we can look at living righteously not as a penance we must pay, a price we owe for God’s gift of eternal life, for salvation, but as a way of living which we choose to do with God, might we satisfy both our human need for independence and our human desire for living “in dependence” with God? Just as with exercising, the biggest reward in living loyally to God is not immediate. And just as with exercise, some days we don’t feel like doing the right thing, some days our old habits kick in; we think of ourselves before God, we tell ourselves we don’t care if we’re separating from God - after all, it’s just one day, we’ll be better tomorrow. Remember on those days the words of Paul, “So what advantage did you then get from the things of which you are now ashamed?” Think at those times of God’s love, and the gift of eternal life, for those who did so much as to share a cup of cold water, for you. And then make as your motto the words of the psalmist, “I trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in salvation.”

Let us pray: God, keep us steadfast in our loyalty to you, and shore us up to let others in in your name.
Amen.