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*This way forward*

## WHEN THE SUN COMES UP, YOU'D BETTER BE RUNNING

Ephesians 1:3-14

June 5, 2016

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*Every morning in Africa, a gazelle awakens. It knows it must run faster than the lion or it will be killed. Every morning in Africa, a lion awakens. It knows it must run faster than the gazelle or it will starve. It doesn't matter whether you are a lion or a gazelle . . . when the sun comes up, you'd better be running.*

This parable has become the theme song for modern American life. We wake up on the run; we leap out of bed, take our showers, wolf down breakfast, if we have any that is, get the kids off to school, and throw ourselves together on the way to work. Even if you're retired, you busily jump from one activity to the next and it's common knowledge that retirement is no retirement at all but simply a shifting of chores. The frenetic activity stays the same, but without any of the pay!

There is a beetle in Africa who, I think, epitomizes the modern struggle. It spends all day every day shaping, molding, rolling, patting, creating perfectly round balls of . . . you guessed it, elephant dung. We frantically jump from one task to the next and, at times, we feel as if our lives accomplish nothing more than putting a good face on a pile of, ahem, refuse.

Unfortunately, this hyper, useless activity does more than keep us busy, it corrodes our well-being. The American Heart Journal suggests it can lead to a heart attack. It lists the following as contributing factors in heart disease: time urgency; being warned by others to slow down; haste in walking, eating or leaving the table after a meal; intense dislike of waiting in lines; loss of temper while driving; teeth grinding, and excessive irritation at the trivial mistakes of others.

This disease results not simply from over activity but a deeper sickness of the soul, loss of meaning, of purpose. This void causes pain, which we try to ignore through toiling at vain tasks. When we

discover ourselves toiling away uselessly, our pain multiplies, which leads us to increase our activity even more, thus trapping us in a vicious cycle.

By ignoring our lack of purpose, our spirits wither and decay, eventually leaving a blackened, mean-spirited soul, much like Liza Hamilton as described in John Steinbeck's *East of Eden*:

... a tight hard little woman humorless as a chicken ...with a dour Presbyterian mind and a code of morals that pinned down and beat the brains out of nearly everything that was pleasant to do.

If you can sympathize with Liza, if you feel anxious or sad for no good reason, if you simply cannot slow down, if you find yourself asking, "What's the point?", then I have great news. Ephesians shows us the way of meaning, thereby showing us how to make the fleeting states of love, joy, and peace that pop up, when the conditions are right, into stations, which are those same qualities now integrated and installed into our daily lives. In Ephesians 1:12, the apostle Paul tells us the meaning of life "that we...might live for the praise of God's glory."

Paul claims our purpose in life, our reason for being, is to offer praises to God's glory. Admittedly, a lofty esoteric answer, which at first glance seems to have, at best, a tenuous connection to humanity's struggle for food, shelter, peace, and health, much less **your** daily battles, to simply not go mad from the onslaught of pressures in modern life. However, we come here professedly as believers and if you'll have a little faith in Paul, we can see how one simple objective can change your life for good!

Paul teaches us that we must live for the praise of God's glory, but you and I have forgotten how. We have allowed ourselves to be distracted. Before we can live for the praise of God's glory, we must

be aware of God at all times. Theophan the Recluse orthodox mystic hints how we might recall,

Remembrance of God is something that God Himself grafts upon the soul. But the soul must also force itself to persevere and to toil. Work, making every effort to attain the unceasing remembrance of God. And God, seeing how fervently you desire it, will give you this constant recollection of Himself.

Mostly we think of God once, twice, maybe three times a week. George Herbert, 17<sup>th</sup> century English poet suggests otherwise,

Sev'n whole days, not one in seven,  
I will praise thee.  
In my heart, though not in heaven,  
I can raise thee.  
Small it is, in this poor sort  
To enroll thee:  
Ev'n eternity is too short  
To extol thee

Despite Herbert's lofty ideals, our attempts to remember God, for the most part, amount to feelings of guilt and confusion concerning God's will.

Nevertheless, if you remember anything from this sermon please remember this, praising God through your life, being faithful to God, does **not** mean you must spend all of your time teaching Sunday school or going to church or volunteering in some service project. God does not want us to spend all our time in church. Rather, God invites us to live out our lives, our normal routines, as acts of praise to God! Brush your teeth, for God! Kiss your spouse and praise God! Clean the house, call your friends, eat a grand feast, share something with your neighbor and do it all for God's sake!

This is where our work enters in. This is the hard part. C.S. Lewis observed,

That is why the real problem of the Christian life comes where people do not normally look for it. It comes the very moment you wake up each morning. All your wishes and hopes for the day rush at you like wild animals. And the first job each morning consists simply in shoving them all back; in listening to that other voice...letting that other larger stronger quieter life come flowing in.

The challenge is to make the intellectual acknowledgment that we live to praise God a genuine, spontaneous thankfulness of the *heart*. Thomas Kelly, Quaker, insightfully comments, "What is urged here are secret habits of unceasing orientation of the deeps of our being about the inward light... while we are also very busy in the world of daily affairs..."

A classic tale of Russian spirituality, *The Way of the Pilgrim*, tells how to turn this desire of the mind into a prayer of the heart. It offers a path to make those fleeting states of love, joy, and peace, into permanent stations. It tells of a peasant whose first concern is to fulfill the Biblical injunction to "pray without ceasing." Seeking for someone who can explain how, he wanders through Russia and Siberia with a knapsack. Finally, he finds an old man who teaches him a constant, uninterrupted calling upon the name of Jesus, "Lord Jesus Christ Son of God have mercy on me," during every occupation, at all times, in all places, even during sleep. At first he says it 2,000 times a day, then 4,000, but still it is only a prayer of the mind. Eventually he can repeat it more than 12,000 times daily without strain. This frequent service of the lips imperceptibly becomes a genuine appeal of the soul. The prayer becomes a constant, warming presence within that brings a bubbling joy. Soon he discovers he no longer needs even to say the words, for they truly have become a prayer of the heart.

The ancient practice of reciting the Jesus Prayer, called Hesychasm, stems all the way back to the fourth century. Huston Smith, expert on World Religions, wrote, "Washing or weaving, planting or shopping, imperceptibly but indelibly these verbal droplets of aspiration soak down into the subconscious loading it with the divine."

Once we become deeply aware of God within us, through us, and around us, then what we do inevitably takes on the cast of acts of service to God and moments of praise. Suddenly, the meaning of life becomes clear to us. The sense of purposelessness disappears, even though for the most part we still perform the same tasks as before.

Even though our daily routine remains unchanged but for one small detail, the unceasing recitation of the name of the Lord. Our purpose is to simply do what we do each day for God.

Paul is so excited over these truths that our entire scripture is one long sentence! And it all builds up to our climax: We were chosen in Christ, destined for adoption, instilled with wisdom, blessed with every spiritual blessing, forgiven, and redeemed. All so that our meaning of life might be fulfilled; so that we might live for the praise of the divine glory! Simply by existing, by walking, eating, crying, laughing, living, dying, we are a witness to the praise of God's glory! Frederick Buechner said it very well, "Each life is not just a journey through time but a sacred journey." Amen.