

## FOCUS ON GOD THROUGH PRAISE

- A. Introduction: We're talking about the importance of getting to know Jesus according to the New Testament record, the only fully reliable source of information about Him. It was written by eyewitnesses—men who walked and talked with Jesus, saw Him die, and then saw Him alive again. They wrote to tell what they saw.
1. Paul the apostle was one of those eyewitnesses. He wrote 14 of the 21 New Testament epistles (letters to believers). In the last few lessons we've referred to a number of statements Paul made about Jesus and his own relationship with the Lord.
    - a. Paul wrote that He lived by faith in Jesus (Gal 2:20). Faith is trust in or reliance on someone or something. When we examine the record of Paul's life we find that, through faith in Christ, he had strength to face his challenges, as well as help, hope, and confidence in the midst of his difficulties.
    - b. Faith in God (trusting Him) can be difficult for us because the object of our faith is invisible. We can't see Jesus with our eyes. And, at times, we all experience emotions and thoughts stimulated by what we see and feel in our circumstances that seem more real to us than God.
  2. How do we overcome these challenges and learn to trust God (live by faith in Him) no matter what we see or feel? We must learn to set our attention and keep our focus on Jesus.
    - a. Paul's writings indicate that he learned to live by looking at what he couldn't see. And, he urged Christian to run their race (live their lives) by looking unto Jesus, the author (source) and finisher (perfecter) of our faith. II Cor 4:18, Heb 12:2
    - b. What does it mean to live by faith in Jesus and live your life looking unto Him? How do you focus your attention on things you can't see? We're going to answer these questions in tonight's lesson.
- B. The first step in living by faith in Jesus is getting to know Him through His written Word, the Bible, particularly the New Testament. (Remember, the New Testament is eyewitness testimony).
1. Faith in God is trust in God. The Greek word translated faith comes from a word that means persuasion.
    - a. Trust in God comes as we become persuaded of His goodness, truthfulness, and faithfulness. The more we get to know Him through His Word, the more this persuasion grows. Rom 10:17
    - b. Faith is the spontaneous response of our heart to God when we see Him as He truly is. Our trust in Him can grow to the point where we are fully persuaded that nothing can come against us that is bigger than God and that He will get us through until He gets us out. Ps 9:10
  2. We said a moment ago that there are constant challenges to faith in God, challenges from circumstances, our mind, and our emotions. This is where the second step in living by faith in Jesus comes into play.
    - a. In the face of troubles, we must learn to acknowledge God. To acknowledge God means to learn to praise Him in every circumstance—good and bad.
      1. Let's take praise out of the realm of music and church activity for a moment. This type of praise (acknowledging God) has nothing to do with music or the worship we do in church. It has nothing to do with putting on some good praise music in your home or car.
      2. To praise simply means to express approval or to commend. To commend means to speak with approval. To approve means to have or express a favorable view (*Webster's Dictionary*).
    - b. When you express this most basic kind of praise you commend someone or acknowledge their character or behavior—you're so thoughtful, you did a great job; etc. That's praise.
      1. When I used to teach high school history there were times when it was appropriate to praise a student for a job well done or an impressive display of character.
      2. I did not sing to the student. I spoke words of praise to him for a well written assignment or for turning in a lost wallet with all the money still inside. It had nothing to do with how I felt or my circumstances. I praised him because it was appropriate. It was the right thing to do.
    - c. To acknowledge God means to talk about Who He is and what he has done, is doing, and will do.

It's always appropriate to praise the Lord, to talk about His goodness and wonderful works.

1. Ps 107:8, 15, 21, 31 exhorts men and women to praise God. The Old Testament was written in Hebrew. There are several Hebrew words that are translated praise in English editions.
  2. The word used for praise in Ps 107 is *yadah*. It means the act of acknowledging what is right about God in praise and thanksgiving. (We spend too much time talking about what is wrong in our circumstances and how God has mishandled things.)
  3. Praise is actually the voice of faith. When you praise or commend God (whom you cannot see) for things you cannot see, it is an expression of faith or trust in Him.
    - a. There's more to reality than what we see and feel in the moment. God, Who is invisible, presides over an unseen realm, a kingdom of power and provision. Not seen doesn't mean not real. It simply means we can't perceive Him or His kingdom with our physical senses.
    - b. We must recognize that there are unseen realities. I don't mean we have a supernatural experience. I mean that we live with the awareness that there is more to reality than what we see and feel.
    - c. Faith in God doesn't deny what it sees or feels. Faith recognizes that there is more information available to us than what we see or feel. This awareness affects how you deal with life.
      1. II Kings 6:15-18—When Elisha the prophet and his servant were surrounded by an enemy army, they saw the same thing. Yet Elisha was confident while the servant was terrified.
      2. Elisha's awareness (his perception of reality) was that he had unseen help. At Elisha's request, the Lord opened the servant's eyes, and the man was able to see what was there all along.
  4. Regular Bible reading helps you become aware of the unseen. Praise (talking about Who God is and what He has done, is doing, and will do) helps you keep your attention on what you cannot see when your emotions are stirred up and thoughts are flying through your head.
- C. Paul faced numerous difficulties throughout his life. In the hard times, he would have encountered the same kinds of thoughts and emotions that we all face in hurtful, harmful circumstances. Yet Paul able to call his difficulties momentary and light because he looked at what he could not see. II Cor 4:17-18
1. II Cor 4:18—We don't focus our attention on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but the unseen realm is eternal (v18, TPT).
    - a. The Greek word that is translated look at or focus your attention on literally means to take aim at. When used figuratively the word means to regard or pay attention to. To pay attention means to fix one's mind upon something. To focus means to concentrate one's attention on one thing.
    - b. Paul fixed his attention on what he couldn't see. There are two kinds of unseen things: those we can't see because they're invisible and those we can't see because they're yet to come.
    - c. Paul lived with the awareness that that there is more to reality than what he could see and feel—and kept his attention on that fact. Information about the unseen is found in the written Word of God.
  2. Everywhere Paul went he was opposed by mobs and slandered by detractors. In II Cor 6 Paul was defending his apostleship, his right to teach and lead the Corinthians Christians (lesson for another day).
    - a. Paul talked about living “in such a way that no one will be hindered from finding the Lord by the way we act, and so no one can find fault with our ministry” (II Cor 6:4-9, NLT).
    - b. In that context, Paul talked about being sorrowful, yet rejoicing. Although “our hearts ache...we always have joy (II Cor 6:10, NLT).
      1. The Greek word that is translated joy and rejoicing (*chairo*) means to be “cheer”ful—not feel cheerful, but be cheerful. To cheer means to give hope, urge on, shout with joy, approval, and enthusiasm—to rejoice (*Webster's Dictionary*).
      2. Paul cheered himself with the Word of God which reveals unseen realities. Remember when he was on board the ship bound for Rome that was about to sink in a severe storm?
        - A. An angel brought the Word of God to Paul, saying that although the ship would be lost, all

on board would survive (Acts 27:22-24). He told the crew to be of good cheer or cheer up.

B. Their situation got worse before it got better. The ship was destroyed and the men aboard floated to shore on pieces of debris. Yet Paul's attention was on unseen realities revealed to him in God's Word. And he knew how to rejoice or cheer himself in the midst of it

C. You cheer yourself by talking about who God is and what He has done, is doing, and will do. In other words you acknowledge or praise God.

3. Acts 16:16-26—Paul cast an evil spirit out of a slave girl. The spirit had enabled her to tell fortunes. Her masters were furious because they made money off of her "ability". They dragged Paul and Silas to the market place. A mob formed. City officials ordered them to be severely beaten and then thrown into a dungeon and put in stocks.

a. What kind of thoughts and emotions did Paul and Silas experience (on top of their physical pain)? This is your fault Silas. You're the one who wanted to come here! It's your fault Paul. You cast the devil out! Is God mad at us? What did we do wrong? He must not love us.

b. There's no hint that they gave in to any of that. Instead, at midnight Paul and Silas prayed and sang praises to God. In other words, they rejoiced—they acknowledged God.

c. Did they feel like? Probably not. They did so because it's always appropriate to praise the Lord. They did so because that's how you keep your focus on unseen realities. That's how you keep your attention on Jesus.

D. We don't have a record of what Paul and Silas said or sang as they praised the Lord in prison. But we have Old Testament accounts of real people acknowledging God in the midst of very difficult circumstances.

1. These accounts were familiar to Paul who, as a Pharisee, was well schooled in the Old Testament. Paul wrote that these accounts are examples we can learn from and draw encouragement and hope. Rom 15:4

a. One such account is found in II Chronicles 20:1-30. Three enemy armies came together to attack the southern portion of Israel (known as Judah) in the time of King Jehoshaphat. Jerusalem, the capital city and home of the Temple of the Lord, was located in Judah.

b. When the news reached the king these armies were already on the march. Jehoshaphat was afraid because his army was no match for the forces coming against him.

2. The king gathered his people together to seek the Lord in this genuinely dangerous situation. Note how they approached the Lord.

a. II Chron 20:5-12—They acknowledged God's bigness (v6), recounted his past help (v7), and then expressed their confidence in His goodness and faithfulness to help them (v8-9). Then they presented the problem. We don't know what to do but our eyes are on you (v10-12).

b. Note several key points. Sometimes people mistakenly think that if you are truly trusting God, nothing bad will happen, or that when bad things do happen, you won't feel negative emotions.

1. There's no such thing as a problem free life in a sin damaged world. And, it is completely normal and appropriate to feel fear in dangerous situations.

2. But that's when knowing that there's more to reality than what you see and feel is vital.

Nothing can come against you that is bigger than God. Nothing is impossible for Him. There is no situation which takes Him by surprise, or for which He has no solution

A. You don't deny what you see and feel. You focus on unseen realities. Acknowledging God by talking about Who He is, what He has done, is doing, and will do helps you keep your attention where it needs to be.

B. You don't have to pretend that you're not in a difficult position. But you do need to learn to talk about your situation in terms of how big God is and what He says about things. 3.

II Chron 20:14-19—God spoke to them through a Levite named Jahaziel. The Lord said, Don't be afraid or dismayed (discouraged) by what you see. I will save you. However, you will have to take

your position and face them. Then, all of Judah praised God for His promise.

a. Nothing changed overnight. A massive army was still on their doorstep. The excitement of hearing a word from the Lord and having a corporate time of worship was fading.

1. What emotions and thoughts might they have experienced? Did we really hear the message correctly? What if Jahaziel was faking it? What if the battle doesn't go our way and we lose?

2. We don't have a record of what went on that night. But remember why you and I are considering this account in our lesson. This would have been part of Paul's view of reality.

b. The next morning as they prepared to go out to meet the enemy Jehoshaphat did two vital things.

1. He urged the people to believe in the Lord and His Word to them (II Chron 20:20). Keep your focus on Him and His Word. Believe is translated from a Hebrew word means to build up or support. It's used of providing stability and confidence like a baby would find in the arms of a parent. Therefore, it can be used in the sense of receiving something as true and sure.

2. Jehoshaphat also sent singers out ahead of the army: Give thanks to the Lord; his faithful love endures forever (II Chron 20:21, NLT). The word praise is used two times in this verse in the King James translation. The Hebrew text actually uses two different words for praise.

A. The first word is *halal* which means to shine, or make a show; to boast, praise, commend. It can mean to shout. The second word is *yadah* which means the act of acknowledging what is right about God in praise and thanksgiving.

B. They went into battle acknowledging God, boasting about His power and His faithfulness.

When they began to praise, the enemy armies started to fight each other. And the people of Judah won the battle without firing a shot (II Chron 20:22-25).

4. Where did Jehoshaphat learn to respond to trouble by acknowledging God? Like Paul he had examples in the Old Testament record. One of King Jehoshaphat's ancestors, David, was a master at praising God in the face of dire circumstances and all the accompanying tormenting thoughts, fear, and pain.

a. David spent many years being pursued by King Saul of Israel who was intent on killing David (lessons for another day). He was cut off from friends and family and forced to live in difficult circumstances. Many of the psalms recount specific instances from David's story.

b. Ps 56 is an "on the run" psalm, written during his years of fleeing from Saul. Note one statement: What time I am afraid, I will trust in you. I will praise your word (v3-4).

1. David felt fear, but he chose to trust God, to place his confidence in the Lord. The word trust expresses the feeling of safety and security that is felt when someone can rely on someone or something. That kind of confidence comes only from getting to know God through His Word.

2. David praised God's Word. Praise is the Hebrew word *halal* (to shine or boast, commend, or shout). In the face of fear generated by fearsome circumstances, David acknowledged God or praised Him by boasting about His Word and His faithfulness to keep His Word.

c. David, like Jehoshaphat and Judah, was ultimately delivered. When we read his psalms we find that David, like Paul, had hope and peace in the midst of his circumstances.

E. Conclusion: We have more to say next week about acknowledging or praising God as an expression of your faith and trust in Him and as a way of keeping your focus on Him. Consider two thoughts as we close.

1. If you don't become a regular Bible reader, you will struggle to keep your attention and focus on the Lord because you have no information with which to battle what you see and feel.

2. We're constantly bombarded by information that contradicts what God says and it can undermine our confidence in Him. You must be able to counteract sight and feelings with additional information.

3. Acknowledging God by talking about who He is and what He has done, is doing and will do helps you do so. When you speak out praise to God, it stops the thoughts. You can't speak one thing and think another. And it brings peace to your mind and heart. More next week!