

## **“In The Darkness As A Light”**

### **Psalm 112:1-9**

Praise the LORD! Happy are those who fear the LORD,  
who greatly delight in God’s commandments.

Their descendants will be mighty in the land;  
the generation of the upright will be blessed.

Wealth and riches are in their houses,  
and their righteousness endures forever.

They rise in the darkness as a light for the upright;  
they are gracious, merciful, and righteous.

It is well with those who deal generously and lend,  
who conduct their affairs with justice.

For the righteous will never be moved;  
they will be remembered forever.

They are not afraid of evil tidings;  
their hearts are firm, secure in the LORD.

Their hearts are steady, they will not be afraid;  
in the end they will look in triumph on their foes.

They have distributed freely, they have given to the poor;  
their righteousness endures forever;  
their horn is exalted in honor.

# In The Darkness As A Light

Psalm 112:1-9

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## I.

Typically, when I sit down to write a sermon, I have a general sense of the direction I would like us to travel, at the least, if not the specific destination at which I hope we will arrive. That said, this is not at all the case today, as I have just one idea I would like to put before us for consideration and I have absolutely no idea where this might lead: the difference, if there is any, between *Expectation* and *Hope*.

This idea, this notion for the sermon, came completely out of the blue and, if I'm being honest, I am at a loss to tell you why it seems important for us to consider; but I do. Admittedly, this may fall under the rubric of mere theological inquisitiveness, but one of the joys of undertaking a life-long journey of faith is allowing oneself the luxury of spiritual curiosity. So, let us wander the wilderness of ideas with an awareness of the signs that might direct us and the instincts which might correct us.

## II.

Preaching from the Psalms is always something of a challenge as these are, in fact, song lyrics of a religious nature which speak to the realities of human experience and which we understand to be the inspired word of God. In broadest strokes, there are 5 different kinds or categories of Psalms.

**Psalms of Lament**, either individual or corporate, are cries to God for help in the midst of emotional and spiritual turmoil.

*I am confined and cannot escape; my eyes are dim with grief.*

*I call to you, Lord, every day; I spread out my hands to you. (Psalm 88:8-9)*

**Wisdom Psalms** instruct humanity on how to live our lives, offering guidance and warnings.

*How can a young person stay on the path of purity?*

*By living according to your word.*

*I seek you with all my heart; do not let me*

*stray from your commands. (Psalm 119:9-10)*

### III.

**Royal Psalms** portray the king as a representative of God and were often sung at special events involving the king of Israel.

*The king rejoices in your strength, Lord.  
How great is his joy in the victories you give!  
You have granted him his heart's desire and have not withheld  
the request of his lips. (Psalm 21:1-2)*

**Imprecatory Psalms** call out for God to send judgement on one's enemies and ask for justice in the aftermath of wrongdoing and pain.

*You know how I am scorned, disgraced  
and shamed; all my enemies are before you.  
May their eyes be darkened so they cannot see,  
and their backs be bent forever.  
Pour out your wrath on them;  
let your fierce anger overtake them. (Psalm 69:19, 22-24)*

**Psalms of Praise** offer thanksgiving to God for deliverance and blessings, with today's scripture reading, Psalm 112, being a good example. (1-2)

*Praise the LORD! Happy are those who fear God,  
who greatly delight in God's commandments.  
Their descendants will be mighty in the land;  
the generation of the upright will be blessed.*

### IV.

In an effort to make sure you walk out of here this morning feeling you got your money's worth out of the sermon, I'll drag you down into the weeds and let you know that Psalm 112 reveals it to be an "alphabetic acrostic." An acrostic is a poem or song lyric in which the initial letters of each successive line form a word, phrase, or pattern. In the case of Psalm 112, the first letter of each line forms the Hebrew alphabet. In all of the Hebrews scriptures there are only 10 instances of alphabetic acrostics; 7 of these are found in the Psalter, with Psalm 119 being the most complete.

While certainly interesting information, this is really neither here nor there and not all that helpful to us. It did, however, get *me* thinking about how people *think*. If we are to imagine the Psalmist sitting down to write these words, then we might understand (in the Hebrew) the *Aleph, Beyt, Gimals*, or ABCs, of how this Psalm came to be.

## V.

If the first line begins with *Aleph*, then the second line will begin with *Beyt*; and so on down the line, or so goes the thinking. Now we are going to make a slight, but significant jump so stay with me; ready?

Having learned an iota (or *yodh*) of Hebrew let's put it to work for us flushing out the the *conditional statement* I sneakily wove into these last few sentences unbeknownst to you. That is, a statement with a hypothesis (the, "If") followed by a conclusion (the "Then"); otherwise known as an "If-Then" statement. We find "If-Then" statements featured prominently in Mathematics, and in it's kissing-cousin, Logic. A common example of this is the transitive property of equality formula which states (sticking with our ABCs motif): if Aleph = Beyt and Beyt = Gimal, then Aleph = Gimal.

## VI.

Having served us well as stepping stones, we now make the leap from Math and Logic to that which might better enlighten us: the *Theology* of "If-Then" statements; with this morning's text from Psalm 112 serving as a representative example.

***If we fear the LORD and greatly delight in God's commandments,***  
***then our descendants will be mighty in the land;***  
***the generation of the upright will be blessed.***



That right *there* is some "Old-Time" religion (click on the link/icon to listen). God has a purpose and plan for this world. *If we stick to the plan, then we will find reward. Conversely, if we don't stick to the plan, then we will get punished; or, at the very least, find ourselves sleeping in the messy bed of our own making.*

## VII.

Well, meaning no disrespect, that kind of Old-Time Religion is *not* good enough for me; and neither should it be for any of you. It isn't so much that "If-Then" theology is "wrong"; it simply is the case that it is a very low bar and one for which we should not settle. Of course, people settle for it all the time and have been doing so for thousands upon thousands of years. As evidenced by the state of the world it yields, this is an approach that simply is not all that effective and it is well past time that we admit this.

“If-Then” theology is a theology of *expectation*. Seen in the poorest light, it is the notion that one must *work* one’s way to heaven; less a Sisyphean task and more a hamster mill that prevents us from realizing we’ve already arrived. Seen in the best light, it is a karmic approach to life where one reaps what one sows. In either case, the “If-Then” theology of expectation completely discounts the grace won on the cross of Christ and the hope to be found therein.

## **VIII.**

While we would do well to believe in the virtue and necessity of good works and the wisdom of heeding karmic consequences, these will never be enough; we should not wish them to be, neither should we fool ourselves into thinking they are.

That said, expectations certainly play an important and positive role in our lives together. We are right to expect a certain civility, a basic humanity, a moral standard and a simple adherence to the rule of law. Expectations instill in us a sense of fair play, of decency, and good neighborliness. As an example, we have expectations for how children will behave and act and, moreover, how parents and adults should be treating children. Expectations hold us together as a society and propel us forward; they motivate us to strive, dream and endeavor.

## **IX.**

Having *expectations*, however, is very different than having *hope*. Though one might be tempted to say that hope begins where expectation leave off, I am not so sure this would be wholly accurate. Hope seems to me to be a different labor unto itself; though it may run somewhat parallel to expectation, if only for a time.

Where expectation may engender entitlement, hope gives rise to gratitude. While expectation may necessitate a certain reasonableness, hope spirits us beyond the boundaries which have been established for us; and, especially, those boundaries we set for ourselves. Whereas expectation is an anticipation of good things, hope is what nevertheless finds a goodness in their absence. Though expectation helps us to *expand* ourselves, hope moves us *beyond* ourselves. Whereas expectation seeks to lighten the darkness of life, hope is what allows us to live in the darkness *as* a light. A light which illuminates not only our own path, but those all around us who are walking theirs as well.

## **X.**

As I said at the start, when I first began thinking about today's sermon I had absolutely no idea where it might lead, and that I was at a loss to tell you why I thought it was important for us to consider the difference between expectation and hope. That there is such a difference, however, was made clear to me this past Friday. That morning, I had only managed to write the introduction to the sermon and only begin to articulate the different categories of Psalms. In other words, not very much.

## **XI.**

At that point, 9 a.m., I received a call from a parishioner who alerted me to a non-life threatening but, still, very serious medical emergency which put them in a bit of a serious pickle. What ensued was a day filled with consternation and heart-ache, the likes of which I have seldom experienced in 30 years of pastoral ministry. To say the situation which need to be resolved was daunting, would be a gross understatement. Simply put, I had absolutely no expectation that what needed to happen *would*, or even *could* happen. Though not necessarily discouraged, I knew from experience that what would be required would be nothing short of a miracle; so that is where I put my hope. Then, almost from the start, the hand of God moved, and the people of this church responded, and that is exactly what occurred: a miracle. And everyone involved came to understand the difference between expectation and hope.

## **XII.**

Next Sunday after worship, I will be leading a class for anyone interested in learning more about our church and, possibly, formally becoming a member of this congregation; with the same class being offered again next month. What will be conveyed in that short, 45 minute window of time is how Presbyterianism fits into the religions of the world, our unique theology and particular form of church government, as well as how this congregation here on the Park organizes itself.

It will be impossible, though, to fully convey the spirit of what it means to bind oneself to this congregation, and have this congregation be bound to you. That is something which must be lived, and learned and experienced first-hand; as it was this past week by a few of the folks who stepped up in the darkness as a light. This is a congregation which places very few expectations on you, but lays upon your heart an incredibly full measure of hope. Amen.