

Title: VALLEY OF WEeping

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As you well know, there are seven messages I preach every year including the Easter message. I preached that on the day of my father's funeral so I'm going to depart from the usual Easter message and preach one of the other seven messages I look at each year. This message has been my own spiritual guiding light throughout all of my adult years and throughout all of my ministry—Psalm 84: "Blessed is the man whose strength is in thee."

Underline the word "blessed". Now churches are associated with blessings that are locatable in time and place, but the Hebrew word here describes a state of being, a condition of being blessed that never changes.

Now I've preached on this message—this verse, for more than 30 years. I don't know how to explain it any differently than I explained it the first time I preached on it. The problem is I need to re-preach it every year because I haven't got there yet. I know what the Hebrew says. It describes a state of blessing that never changes. It isn't a sometime affair. It is an "always-the-same" state of being blessed. I ain't there yet, but I know how to get there. That's why I'm preaching the message. It is a state of blessing that not everybody gets—"Blessed is the man." The definite article separates this guy out from the rest of the crowd. It isn't something just sort of sprayed out of heaven. A certain kind of individual has this blessing. "Blessed is the man whose strength is in thee; in whose heart are the ways of them."

Verse 6: "Who passing"—that verb form makes it clear the blessing attaches to somebody that is going somewhere, a process of change. I already don't like some of the conditions. I'm getting old enough that I don't like change, and I have gone through enough that there isn't anything else God needs to teach me, particularly this kind of stuff.

When I was 30, I used to preach this. I'd be at churches with people having gray hair and I could preach it with vim and vigor. Just understand this about Christianity—there's no sitting-down place. There is no accomplishment, no place of achievement, no point at which you arrive and sit there and say, "Look at the rest of those miserable creatures trying to get where I am." Christianity is a journey, not a destination—until we reach that ultimate destination over there. That means there's change built in.

The Old Testament says concerning a nation that God didn't think too much of, He says "They've settled on their lees." It's a word out of winemaking; it means "settled". And He goes on to say they've "not been emptied from vessel to vessel"; so their lees is still in them and they stink and smell bad because they haven't been emptied. The process of making the wine would empty one vessel into another and leave the lees behind.

When I was younger I used to really lay into this. You've got to expect change. Today's victory is setting you up for Satan's attack. And there is simply no place on this Christian journey that you can lay down and say, "Whew! All I have to do, now that I've made my mark and achieved my points and

proved to God that I'm okay, is just lay here and wait for Him to take me home." Uh-uh! Now if you don't like it, you ain't even close to me.

I used to preach through this part of the message real fast because it was so obvious. I was young and I was going somewhere. Now this is the part of the message I hate. You that have listened for fifteen years, you know I used to go through this part real fast. I would quote Dr. Tozer: "Christianity is a journey, not a destination." I'd point out how so much of Christianity aims toward that one goal: come down to the altar, recite some little routine speech; you're safe, slap them on the back, and send them out. That's it—eternally secure! "Do whatever you want! You've made it, man! You've paid a one-time premium on your eternal insurance policy—you're in! Now get on out of here till I make room for the next one. You're a scalp on my belt!"

The Pentecostals went a little further, and the Second Definite Work of Grace people went further and they had a second experience that people had; and when you got it, man, you waved the rest of them on, so that they could get; and when you got it, you're better than the rest and you don't have anything else to get. I've told you I was a teenager in a Pentecostal church background, going to camp meetings madder than hell because the rest of the kids "had it" and were out playing football; and they were still trying to give it to me there in the sawdust of the tent. I wanted not God so much, as to get this thing over with, so I could go play football.

Destinations! As Reinhold Niebuhr has said, the tragedy of the Pentecostal experience and the Second Definite Work of Grace people—the Nazarenes, and those who have understood there is an experience beyond the starting point, is that the experience that should have produced a greater degree of sinlessness became a vehicle for the worst kind of sin: spiritual pride. And they just camped there and waved everybody else on.

There is no stopping point. That's why we are just starting anew with this ministry: everything has been preparation; everything has been training; everything was getting us ready to make the world our parish. Truly, as we take on a new step of faith, we recognize that we're pilgrims down here. We're on a journey and this verse, consistent with that truth, says this blessed man, this individual who's separated from the crowd who has a state of blessing on his life that never leaves, is on a journey—constantly changing.

The next phrase says, "Who passing through the valley of Baca." You know what baca means? Let me hear it! Baca translates "weeping". Now it's even worse than what I said—not only constant change, the life is that of someone on a journey in that change and on that trip... (and I remind us this Easter 1991, as we look forward to another year), part of the trip through which the blessed man goes is the "valley of weeping". So often we let the illusion creep into Christianity that if you are really in God's will, you won't have these valleys of weeping.

My Bible says blessed men, while in the state of blessing—no qualities of which in the blessing state are changing, go through valleys of weeping.

I'm right where I was last Sunday when I preached from Isaiah, "Who is among you that feareth the Lord, obeyeth the voice of his servant, but walketh in darkness, and hath no light?" I am tired of this gingerbread religion that creates, I repeat, the illusion that when you find yourself smack-dab in the middle of a valley of weeping, it means that you have somehow forsaken God or God has forsaken you. It's part of the trip! Through the mid-week right now I'm preaching or teaching on Exodus, that Old Testament congregation that God led into the wilderness... Deuteronomy says, "to see what was in their heart and to prove them". And during this past week we've marched them from the victory of the Red

Sea where God had done everything. All they had to do was, “Stand still and see the salvation of the Lord.”

From the victory of the Red Sea where they didn’t do anything.... (You know, I can’t remember when God’s been that nice to me.) “Stand still”, Moses said, “and see the salvation of the Lord.” He parted the Red Sea and killed all their enemies. And you’ve heard me on the Gulf War. You know, I hear all these Christians praying for their enemy. Man, I ain’t praying for them. I’m praying for them to be deader than a hammer and I got good Bible. I mean the saints of the Old Testament stood by the Red Sea after all Pharaoh’s army sank like a stone. God’s got a sense of humor. He ripped the wheels off of their wagons before He turned the water loose on them; they were bouncing along and drown.

And God’s people danced and rejoiced: “Look what our God has done for us! He sank old Pharaoh in the sea like a stone.” Then God marched them three days into a wilderness where they were thirsty and murmuring, to the waters of Marah that were bitter. They went from the wilderness of Shur to another place of blessing, then from the place of blessing, to Elim with twelve wells and 70 palm trees. When you think about it, it wasn’t really that hot a spot for them because they had three and a quarter million people to fight over twelve wells and 70 palm trees. But then He led them into the wilderness of “sin” translated “clay” where He fed them manna from heaven and taught them to learn that He was their provider day by day.

Then they went to Sinai which means the “God of sin” which is “the God of the place of clay” where they learned the lessons. In short, it was in the wilderness spots that they learned God’s ways and learned His capacities to provide. They didn’t learn much rejoicing by the sea where they saw God’s victory hand; they didn’t learn much at the wells of Elim; they didn’t even learn much at Sinai when God was talking on the mountain—and they were jigging around the golden calf down at the bottom having a party.

It’s in the trying times that the test of Christianity sorts out those who really have it and those who don’t. And this “valley of weeping” like the “wilderness of sin”, or if we follow them next week they’re led to a place called Rephidim which means in the original “place of rest”, and all it was was spiny cactus, dirt, and rocks.... So God’s ways are not our ways. All I want to get across, and then I’ll leave it, is that contrary to a lot of traditional preaching that makes Christianity compete on some kind of smorgasbord of immediate success and good life, thereafter the blessed man of Scripture finds that his journey goes through valleys of weeping.

I’ve had to remind myself of that this past year. The weepings are different than they used to be. I can remember the kinds of valleys that I went through when I preached this as a missionary traveling for eighteen years around the world. Now the valleys of weeping are considerably different. There are times that I wish this Cathedral didn’t exist. There are times that the weight and the pressure of God’s blessing that has made us grow beyond the abilities of those that God has provided to help get the job done, or if not the abilities beyond their energies and beyond mine—the valleys take on a different tone.

But there is still that reality to the Christian experience that as you move ever forward following God, these people that sit on TV and grin at you and act like there is never a cloud in the sky are either full of crap and lying, or they don’t know God. They’re serving the prince of this world. And since God’s not a bully, He doesn’t try to push those people around. It’s the ones that belong to God that Satan is constantly trying to grab.

I have not yet escaped the valleys of weeping. I’m not just talking about those natural calamities—I’ve cried and missed my dad many times. I’m talking about these spiritual valleys where it seems that

you've taken a step of faith and God never.... There's one thing that God is consistent with: He goes somewhere, every time, immediately after He motivates me to do something for Him.

Ever notice that? I get ready to give up on God and say, "Oh!"—I talk pretty plain to God—"Take it! Another big mess you got me in! You got it. You've got it. Bye"—and He will not leave me alone.

"I've come to peace! I'm leaving this crap! God can have it"—and He'll pick up my handkerchief and follow me and bother me the whole way—every time! Never fails. But with equal consistency, He will make Himself sufficiently real to me. I'll say, "Well, there is something to this way of faith! I'm going to go for it. Come on, let's go for God!" Then He goes on vacation—every time! Never ever seen it fail. It's those kinds of valleys of weeping I'm talking about. "Where are you God? Another fine mess you got me into!"

There ain't nothing more..., I already said, that God can teach me. I know what I'm preaching today—why do I have to keep learning it every year? You just think everything is on keel, and out of the blue will come something that just shatters everything. And like an old soldier that has been out there too many times, I don't get up as easy anymore. It was a blissful kind of warfare when I started out as a Christian. I didn't know the devil was as tough as he was. I would sing silly little songs like "Write the name of the devil on the bottom of your shoe and walk around on him." I mean he's tougher than the Ninja Turtles, I'll tell you that!

I knew all the promises of God, and I'd listen to the preachers and they'd tell you, and I'd see them get all starry-eyed: "Satan's under your feet! And the devil is under you and God has conquered him and 'Greater is he that is in you, than he that is in the world'!" And I'd say "That's right!" and then the devil would knock me 75 feet. And I'd get up and say, "This fight is just starting!"

Now, I would walk around a tree to miss the devil. I'm tired of fighting; I'm worn out with it. Don't want any more valleys of weeping. I told God that all year, and He said, "I'm the Boss! Valleys are part of the trip." I don't want you surprised this year. Cheer up, saints! It's going to get worse. I'll tell you something else though, when the devil gets.... When I finally get up, he's got more to contend with!

Now this church is not going to stand still. And I don't intend to retire, and I have great respect for the devil's ability and his weaponry. And I can say what the preacher said without saying it with so much vim: "Greater is he that is in us, than he that is in the world." And now I know, though I have to relearn it a bit, to pull out the Bible and do what I'm doing today as we go into this year; and I expect to announce Secret Five has become a reality. And as we invade the territory of the "prince of the power of the air" and make what we have the capacity to do. (This the greatest and most powerful radio network ever formed in the world.) I expect Satan to move because he knows that we are truly invading his territory. And I want to be ready—for the church..., for myself..., and I want you to be ready for valleys of weeping that will come. I also want you to apply it individually—valleys of weeping are part of the journey. You don't want to give up because valleys are there.

I'm going to say two things I always say when I preach this message. The "cause" is unimportant. It is Satan's way when you get into a valley to start dealing with the "why". If you made some mistake and you're to blame and you know it, Satan loves to beat you to death with your conscience. He will sit on one shoulder and say, "Well, be the man. You are to blame—you know what you did; just suffer it out." Well I want you to say in the name of Jesus to the devil when he does that to you, "Up yours! Up yours!"

You can take this verse of Scripture and diagram the sentences. There's not one word in there about "cause". It does not matter whether you're to blame or not. "Blessed men", and that's the next word I want you to underline, "go through valleys of weeping". You can beat yourself to death with your conscience—camp out and build a house in it. There's not a word in this verse about "cause", just the statement "Blessed men go through."

If you are to blame for your mess, commit it to the cross. Christ died to cover our sins. You only have to be honest about it with God, nobody else—and with Him only once. It doesn't matter to you that are in a valley of your own "mess up", my message to you today is: "Blessed men go through!" Cause doesn't matter. Quit blaming yourself. You can't rewrite history. That's the goodness of God's grace. Commit it to Him. "Well, I'm not to blame!"

Or just the opposite; "There ain't no reason for what's happening to me. I've been faithful! I've done my best and the whole world's dumped on me." The devil will jump from the shoulder of accusation to the shoulder of sympathy. Oh, he loves to do that! "That's right. I wouldn't serve a God treats you that way or lets that happen to you. You are not to blame for anything." When that happens, you say, "Up yours!" again because it doesn't matter. It doesn't matter if you're innocent. Valleys of weeping are part of the trip, but blessed men go through. Sympathy will kill you. "Oh gloom, despair, and agony on me!" Quit camping out in your valley.

I'm preaching a grown-up religion! Valleys of weeping are part of the trip. "The rain falls on the just and the unjust alike", but blessed men go through those valleys. They not only go through them—well, let me add one other thing: there's nothing in the verse about how long the valleys are. You might go across in one long step or you may be in it for a long time. The verse doesn't say: "Blessed men go through valleys they don't think will kill them," just the certainty of God's promise: "You're going to make it!" This is not some fantasy-land religion that says what is real is not really real. Your valley is just as bad as you think it is, but it doesn't matter whether you are to blame or innocent—"Blessed men go through."

"I'm coming out; today could be the day!"—don't ever turn loose of that attitude! "Blessed men go through!"

Most of my life, it's getting better... I have to analyze it today and it almost makes me mad to admit it, but it's getting better. It used to be my life was just one long valley with occasional humps.... You are awful! You're impossible! You can't keep these people in a spiritual frame! Now how do I say it's getting better? Let's go on.

Not only do blessed men go through, "Blessed is the man... who passing through the valley of Baca"—or "weeping", "make it a well". The original says: they make it to become "a place of springs". Don't you know we could have sat in the valley of Hope Street? And, as always, the worse valleys come from those that are supposed to be Christian brethren. But we made it into this "place of springs" because we would not say "No".

We would not accept circumstance as the final answer. Blessed people don't die in their valley. Indeed, the goal of the blessed man of this verse is not just to last it out—this kind of person transforms the valleys. They see them as an opportunity to turn them into 'a place of springs.' There've been a few times.... I used to when I traveled a lot—would at least one night during a campaign or one evening go with the pastor to the hospital.

I've had those experiences where I've gone to visit people in extremity and walked out having been blessed by them. You turn that valley that would crush other people—and this is the mark of real Christianity, you turn it into “a place of springs” until that very valley becomes an opportunity to shine forth more blessing.

Now the question is how blessed men go through valleys of weeping—they go through those valleys; they turn them into a place of springs. How? Go to that first verse, “Blessed is the man whose strength is”... What does it say? “in thee.” That's the clue! That's the clue. “Blessed is the man whose strength is in thee.” Jesus never said we wouldn't go through valleys. Indeed He said in the world we'd have tribulation. He said He'd be with us in those valleys—never leave us, never forsake us. Jesus is not the God of the mountaintops only. God's promise is that when we in faith put our hand in His, He never will let go.

That was the message last Sunday: “Don't doubt in the dark what you learned in the light.” You may not see God; He sees you. Sure, “Whom the Lord loveth he traineth.”; that is Hebrews. Sure, “There are manifold tribulations”, Peter said, but he uses the same Greek word “manifold blessings”. “God will not tempt us beyond what we're able, but will with the temptation grant a way of escape”—and the Greek has it the way of escape is as individualized, as I said last Sunday to you, as the temptation. “Blessed is the man whose strength is in thee.”

God called Elijah—sent him to the brook Cherith; fed him with ravens, but the Book says after a while the brook dried up. F.B. Meyer said God was teaching Elijah to trust the Giver of the gifts instead of the gift that He gave him. God has to empty us, as said earlier, from vessel to vessel. These valleys of weeping are designed to teach us to trust the Lord Himself. He is with us and if our strength is in Him, then all I need to know is that I'm going with God and the valley doesn't matter. “Blessed is the man whose strength is in thee, in whose heart are the ways of them.” How many have “them” written in italics in your Bible? Let me see your hands. Italics means: it is added by the translators. The original refers back to the same “thee”. “Blessed is the man whose strength is in thee, and in whose heart are the ways of thee.” Scratch the “them” out—added by the translators. It is: “the ways of thee.”

God not only is interested in us and looking out for us and taking us through our valleys, He wants us to know His ways. We're going to rule and reign throughout eternity with Him, and He wants us to know His ways. After forty years in the wilderness, God lamented that the children of Israel only saw His actions; Moses alone came to know His ways. How many of you can testify that over these fifteen years you have come to know the ways of God? More and more you see Him.

Well, let me try one out on you. How many of you have learned that He expects more out of you now, than He did when you started? Okay, you are learning the ways of God. How many are finding out that He is no longer as easy to coerce with testimonials of how much you're sacrificing for Him? You're learning His ways. He is taking you home, seasoned warriors. A man whose source of strength is in the knowledge of God Himself, and His presence with you, and the ways of God, doesn't break in the valleys of weeping.

Now I end it. Verse 11: “For the Lord God is a sun and shield.” This is part of His ways; “The Lord God is a sun and shield.” This is what He is trying to teach you. What is the role of the sun in this universe? Everything revolves around it; it controls the paths of the elements in the universe. Ignorant primitive mankind thought the sun was going around them. The sun controls; the sun giveth life; the sun gives light, warmth, provision. Without it you ain't growing much, friend. That's what the blessed man comes to know: the Lord is all in all.

I'll say this: I don't like valleys much, but I'm a little.... I still talk back to God on a lot of things, but not as much. I really believe I'm a lot more in God's control than your pastor was when he came here fifteen years ago. I sure know I want to be. That's what we learn as we go along. I don't like the valleys when I'm in them, but they've taught me things that the victories didn't. And the Christian learns to trust and let "the Son" rule.

Shield. This is the hardest point for me to experientially accept: to believe that God doesn't let anything happen to us that He doesn't in His planning allow. As the Lord of hosts, Satan is under His control. The demons still shake in His presence and, like God lifting that shield on Job, everything that has happened to you this past year, everything that's going to happen, every valley of weeping that you hit, God who is a Shield—in His wisdom to teach us, is letting it happen. Your ability to deal with the valley of weeping is immeasurably increased when you come to that trust that you are in the Lord's orbit; and He as a Shield doesn't let anything come in that you are not capable of handling.

Number 3. "The Lord will give grace and glory." Yeah, the valleys come but so does unmerited favor. I've heard.... I always got amused about this as I've watched the church world, when some preacher is center stage and he's got all the glory how they love to say that erroneous theological doctrine, "God will share His glory with no one" as they stand there and tell God what He can't do. My Bible right here says God will give glory. "God gives grace"—unmerited favor, "and glory". What God will not share is the dispensing of His glory. But He will give glory—He will bless; He will honor. There are valleys of weeping, but that's not the whole trip—you go through them. And the Lord gives grace; and the Lord gives glory.

Last but not least, I want you to look at the 8th verse: "O Lord of hosts." You know what that Name means don't you? I preached on the names of the Lord last Sunday. This is the one that speaks of His ability to control everything. I've already said of the devil and his demons, God will.... There are occasions in the Bible, the battle of Deborah and Barak, where God had the stars join in the battle. He swallowed up Pharaoh's army with the Red Sea. As the Lord of hosts, He controls inanimate objects. He controls the universe. He controls supernatural beings, both angels and demons. He controls heathen countries and nations, and works them on His set times.

That's what the name "Lord of hosts" means. That means any problem you and I face, He's got the goods to deal with it. "O Lord of hosts, Lord God of hosts, hear my prayer: give ear, O God of Jacob. Selah"—or "think of that".

Now you could read past that 8th verse and not pick anything up if you were in a hurry, but by the time that Psalm was written, Jacob was long since dead. Jacob had long since wrestled with an angel all night, and Jacob—whose name means "heel catcher", always grabbing for himself and looking out for himself—conniving, self-centered Jacob had long since had his name changed by God to "Israel" which means "prince that has power with God". In this verse, God through the inspiration of the psalmist is saying something very important to those of us that get staggered by these valleys of weeping; that have to learn anew each year to put our trust in the Lord Himself; and to learn His ways in the process, who cry out for God to bring His power to bear on our problems. The Lord of hosts is that way-out-there Name.

I mean, you know we are talking about a little financial problem or a sickness, or my daughter or my son or my loved one in the Gulf, and we are crying out "Lord of hosts, in my valley of weeping will you—who can marshal everything that is and bring it to bear, can you be concerned with little me and my problem?" It doesn't say, "O Lord God of hosts, hear my prayer: give ear, O God of Israel." If it said, "O Lord God of Israel"—and I repeat, Jacob was long since changed in his nature and changed in his

name. He died as “Israel” not “Jacob”. If it said, “Give ear, O Lord of hosts, O God of Israel,” I’d say, “Well, I got to do a lot of changing before God will listen to me!” But it says, “O Lord God of hosts, hear my prayer: O God of Jacob”—that conniving, grabbing worm who was named Jacob when he came out of the womb because of his selfish ways.

What God is trying to say to those, you and I, who are going to confront or who are confronting valleys of weeping? “Available: Lord God of hosts. Recipient: Anyone of us—because the Lord God of hosts is also the God of Jacob. One of the things that I love about the Bible—if all the people that God dealt with were as perfect as Isaiah, I’d be left out. But the Lord God of hosts is also the God of Jacob—sinning..., stumbling..., conniving..., look-out-for-myself... Jacob can still be a blessed man who passing through his valley of weeping turns to the Lord and calls out to Him for His strength.

I look back on a lot of years of God leading me. He knows my heart; He knows my down-sittings; He knows my uprisings; He knows me better than anybody. And He knows that when the chips are down, I want His will and I want to please Him more than anybody else. At the same time as He has come to know my ways, I’ve come to know His. And I’m so grateful to preach this Easter Sunday knowing that we serve a risen Savior who is the Lord of hosts, who to those who want God to rule their life; who want His will and who want His way; and who stretch up our hands to Him in our valleys of weeping, I repeat—He will never let go. Our strength is in Him because He is with us.

He is the Lord of hosts, but He is also the God of Jacob. He reaches down to hold our hand in those valleys the way a father reaches down to his little child that is still clay in terms of character being molded. But the father is going to look out for him.

The Lord of hosts who hears our prayer is the God of Jacob. You don’t have to be a Pope to have Him listen to you. Whoever you are, in whatever circumstance, God—the Lord of hosts is more than a match for your problem; and because He’s the God of Jacob, He is willing to reach down, take your hand, and lead you through it.

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