

OVERCOMING IN THE DUST BOWL

Psalm 63

A Psalm of David when he was in the wilderness of Judah.

O God, You are my God; Early will I seek You; My soul thirsts for You; My flesh longs for You in a dry and thirsty land where there is no water. So I have looked for You in the sanctuary, to see Your power and Your glory. Because Your lovingkindness is better than life, my lips shall praise You. Thus I will bless You while I live; I will lift up my hands in Your name.

My soul shall be satisfied as with marrow and fatness, And my mouth shall praise You with joyful lips. When I remember You on my bed, I meditate on You in the night watches. Because You have been my help, therefore in the shadow of Your wings I will rejoice.

My soul follows close behind You; Your right hand upholds me. But those who seek my life, to destroy it, shall go into the lower parts of the earth. They shall fall by the sword; They shall be a portion for jackals. But the king shall rejoice in God; Everyone who swears by Him shall glory; But the mouth of those who speak lies shall be stopped.

I'm sure you've heard the expression, "God helps those who help themselves." How about, "When the going gets tough, the tough get going?" King David didn't ascribe to that sort of philosophy, and really, neither should we. David knew who to turn to, in good times and bad. Whether he was jubilantly dancing before the Lord when they brought the ark into Jerusalem (to the unwarranted shame of his wife) or when he was crying out to the Lord for help, when he was running for his life from Saul. David knew, as he wrote "The earth is the Lord's, and all its fullness, The world and those who dwell therein." (**Psalm 24:1**)

When we believe Christ, we are acknowledging that we are sinners that need saving. Everyone should come to that truth as "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." (**Romans 3:23**) The rest of that sentence though is this, "being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate **His righteousness**, because in **His forbearance** [His longsuffering, His tolerance and restraint] God had passed over the sins that were previously committed, to demonstrate at the present time **His righteousness**, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus."

Now that is one glorious run-on sentence. One of my professors pointed out one of my run-on sentences, in a paper I wrote, and quipped, "the Apostle Paul would be proud." Yet in that long sentence Paul explains that we are saved by the grace of God, by the blood of Jesus, and in His righteousness. To drive home the point, Paul mentions "His righteousness" twice. "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. For we are **His workmanship**, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them." (**Ephesians 2:8-10**)

When we accept Christ's redemption for our sins, we receive Him into our hearts, to which He works in us His Wisdom, Righteousness, Sanctification, and Redemption, so that anyone who glories should glory in the Lord. (**1 Corinthians 1:30-31**) As He is our Lord and Savior we are committing ourselves to Him. We are to be surrendering our lives to Him. But really, we are God's possession even if we acknowledge that fact or not. When God gets our attention, He is wanting us to be enlightened with the truth that is in Christ Jesus. He's not wanting us to be enlightened so that we can be building our kingdom on this earth, and He is not enlightening us to make a name for ourselves. He wants us to know Him, to know Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith. Our Lord, our God, our Savior, our Deliverer, our Rock and our Fortress. King David said, "I will love You, O Lord, my strength. The Lord is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer; My God, my strength, in whom I will trust; My shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold. I will call upon the Lord, who is worthy to be praised; So shall I be saved from my enemies." (**Psalms 18:1-3**)

David was a great and mighty warrior. He killed a bear and a lion and the giant Goliath with a slingshot and a rock. Yet he knew the source of his strength and protection. The world, that is, the people of this world, are always looking for a way out of being accountable to God, the Creator of all things, the Sovereign God who reigns over all of **creation**. It can be said that we are in a closed system. Paul explains that in **Colossians 1:16-17**, "For by him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers: all things were created by him, and for him." Nothing exists outside of God and His creation.

We've previously looked at the transcendental era that came about in the writings of celebrated authors in the mid-1800s and then the naturalism era that followed. The transcendentalists ascribed to the notion that one could transcend the things that are seen to become illumined beyond the ordinary. The belief of the naturalists though was that all that is seen to exist is all that there is. As we know from the wisdom of King Solomon, that there is nothing new under the sun. In the garden of Eden, man was promised by Satan that if they

disobeyed God, they could become like God (and be illumined. How's that knowledge of good and evil blessings us? How is the decay of our bodies, getting older, and stiffer, and sorer? How is the entropic nature of all things working out for us, as everything just gets worse and worse?) After the great flood, the fine folks of Babylon hadn't quite learned the lesson of God's wrath. They said that they wanted to make a name for themselves by building the tower of Babel. Also, God had told them to spread out on the earth and populate it yet they were wanting to concentrate in one area to make a name for themselves. Good idea! How did that work out for them?

Plain and simple, we are either for God or against Him. We can decide to live our lives unto ourselves but eventually, after God says enough is enough, He will deal with us. That goes for us on an individual basis and also collectively, as a society. His judgment indeed is coming to this earth, there is no doubt about that. If we think it's bad now, just read Revelation. There are times throughout our nation's history where it seems that God has dealt with the people at that time. One period of time was during what we call the great depression. Not only did the stock market crash in 1929 but there was great suffering and poverty in this nation. John Steinbeck addressed the issues that took place with the people that had moved to the midwest, to have their own farms, and to live a self-sustaining lifestyle. John Steinbeck's novel, which became a movie, was called *Grapes of Wrath*. Those two sayings, "God helps those who help themselves" and, "When the going gets tough, the tough get going" weren't much use for what the people at that time had to go through. They needed divine intervention.

"Steinbeck's Dust Bowl" is a more fitting title to the novel, *Grapes of Wrath*, written by John Steinbeck. Tom Joad, the main protagonist in the story meets up with a preacher acquaintance, Jim Casy, that has given up the Christian faith and then derived at a philosophy similar to what can be learned of Walt Whitman, and all of his transcendental contemporaries, in the mid-1800s.

As Cliffnotes.com puts it, "He [Casy] maintains that all people are holy, everyone being part of the whole soul of humankind."¹ Sound familiar? Walt Whitman quipped this beauty in *Song of Myself*, "Divine am I inside and out, and I make holy whatever I touch or am touch'd from, the scent of these arm-pits aroma finer than prayer, this head more than churches, bibles, and all the creeds."² That philosophy or worldview will leave one's spirit as dry as the plains of Oklahoma during the depression. Especially, when the one who holds to such a mind-set comes to the realization that the subsequent naturalism movement of the later 1800s, and into the early 1900s, might be onto

1 "The Grapes of Wrath, Book Summary", CliffNotes, accessed April 5, 2023, <https://www.cliffsnotes.com/literature/g/the-grapes-of-wrath/book-summary>

2 "Song of Myself (1892 version)", Poetry Foundation, accessed April 5, 2023, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45477/song-of-myself-1892-version>

something, in recognizing that at the core of mankind is just an unregenerate man struggling to survive. The nature of man is described by the Apostle Paul saying, "There is none righteous, no, not one." (**Romans 3:10**)

What also then gets overlooked is that this present lifetime on this earth is not our home. With the characters in this story, without that bit of understanding, it has them parched and wanting. The author, John Steinbeck, describes in masterly fashion, the plight and the living condition of the "okies" that had to migrate west to find work to survive and be able to feed their families. The work camps resembled much of what we see with the homeless and in the homeless camps today; tolerated for a time before they're run off.

This story though falls in line with Steinbeck's philosophy, as described in a title of another story of his, *To a God Unknown*. With this story, Steinbeck has the preacher saying, "I figgered about the Holy Sperit and the Jesus road. I figgered, 'Why do we got to hang it on God or Jesus? Maybe;' I figgered, maybe it's all men an' all women we love; maybe that's the Holy Sperit—the human sperit—the whole shebang. Maybe all men got one big soul ever'body's a part of.' Now I sat there thinkin' it, an' all of a suddent—I knew it. I knew it so deep down that it was true, and I still know it'?"³

Call it pantheism, secularism, new-age or whatever but what I call it is blasphemy, or at best, the ramblings of a lost soul. The Word of God gives us a perfect example, of what God spoke to King Solomon concerning the Israelites, "When I shut up heaven and there is no rain, or command the locusts to devour the land, or send pestilence among My people, if My people who are called by My name will humble themselves, and pray and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land." (**2 Chronicles 7:13-14**)

Grapes of Wrath was, "widely panned by business and government officials who took umbrage at its socialist overtones and denounced it as communist propaganda"⁴, I call it a travesty of words. With Steinbeck's influence and following, just imagine if he were to have written this novel as a call back to repentance to God. Instead of pointing society to God, Steinbeck has the characters saying "by God" and "God Awmighty" as just being a transition in speech or having not much more pertinence to our Creator God than an exclamation of "oh golly" or "gee willickers".

I'm not sure how much *Grapes of Wrath* tells the true story of what took place during the Dust Bowl era, but as with most of the

³ John Steinbeck, *Grapes of Wrath* (New York: Random House, 1939), 32-33.

⁴ "Grapes of Wrath", *Britannica*, accessed April 5, 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/The-Grapes-of-Wrath>

prominent writers in American history, there is a prevalent push towards godlessness, or Christlessness. Whether a writer points to the need for strength in fortitude of the characters (and then to society at large) or whether it is a call for reforms in business or government, without Christ we are not much more than barbaric beasts, similar to King Nebuchadnezzar when God had him dethroned and eat grass like an animal. Jesus' words keep calling to anyone who has ears to hear, "The thief does not come except to steal, and to kill, and to destroy. I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly. I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives His life for the sheep." (John 10:10-11)

Reading Grapes of Wrath and having a bleeding heart for social justice and reform will never solve the plight of God's creation in this fallen from grace world. God is calling us out of this darkness and into His marvelous light. (1 Peter 2:9) Jesus assures us, as we live in a sin-plagued world, that in this lifetime, we will have suffering and tribulation. The exceedingly good news is Jesus proclaimed, "Be of good cheer. I have overcome the world!" (John 16:33)

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