

Nourishment for the Journey

Ruminations on Psalm 27

If we are brave, we have sources of courage that we draw from to help us to keep our resolve when under duress, temptation, hardship, and threats. Those sources may be many, or may be few. For the Psalmist, God was the source of that courage to face all the challenges of life.

God, of course, is not the only source of courage available to us; or perhaps not even the best according to a Jewish commentary that claims that the 32 most righteous and courageous people to ever exist are those who don't even believe in God, but still do what God would have any of us to do. In other words, these 32 most righteous ones act ethically for the sake of goodness itself; not because they seek to acquire a heavenly (or earthly) reward or avoid a hellish punishment. They are motivated by goodness alone, and that is arguably much braver, and more moral, than acting for an ulterior motive.

But wherever we draw our courage to live rightly, we should employ those methods to help us to stay true to goodness (i.e., what God would have us to do). When we read Psalm 27, we may wonder if there is veracity in all that it has to say. Do evildoers really not succeed? Do they inevitably "stumble and fall" as the Psalmist asserts? Not if we take an honest look at history. They usually live longer and have far more power than the good people they persecute.

When we think of good people who have lived and died throughout the ages, we begin to see a connection that the most genuinely moral people often end up being killed for their faithfulness to goodness. It seems evil doesn't want genuine goodness around, and disposes of those who might help change the world from a corrupt system that benefits the few to an ethical system that benefits all equally. Many of the prophets who proclaimed justice for the poor and weak were murdered, as was Jesus. The Catholic church has a long list of martyrs.

And names like Abraham Lincoln, Pontiac, Sitting Bull, Leon Trotsky, Mahatma Gandhi, George W. Lee, Lamar Smith, Thomas Hency Brewer, Herbert Lee, Medgar Evers, Louis Allen, James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, Michael Schwerner, John F. Kennedy, Malcolm X, James Reeb, Viola Liuzzo, Jonathan Daniels, Sammy Younge Jr., Vernon Dahmer, Wharlest Jackson, Benno Ohnesorg, Che Guevara, M.L. King, Jr., Robert F. Kennedy, Tom Mboya, Fred Hampton, Ghassan Kanafani, Amilcar Cabral, Carlos Mugica, Jose Toha, Omar Benjelloun, Herbert Chitepo, Josiah Mwangi Kariuki, Roque Dalton, Boonsanong Punyodyana, Enrique Angelelli, Steve Biko, Janani Luwum, Rutilio Grande, Mir Akbar Khyber, Henri Curiel, Georgi Markov, Harvey Milk, Allard K. Lowenstein, Oscar Romero, Walter Rodney, Marcelo Quiroga Santa Cruz, John Lennon, Ruth First, Pierre Declercq, Anwar Sadat, Attati Mpakati, Benigno Aquino Jr., Henry Liu, Jerzy Popieluszko, Shahnawaz Bhutto, Murtaza Bhutto, Fort Calata, Matthew Goniwe, Sicelo Mhlauli, Sparrow Mkhonto, Hugo Spadafora, Dian Fossey, Olaf Palme, Dulcie September, Chico Mendes, David Webster, Luis Carlos Galan, Anton Lubowski, Segundo Montes, Ignacio Ellacuria, Marsha P. Johnson, Tahar Djaout, Chris Hani, Melchior Ndadaye, Jon Simmons, Johan Heyns, Iqbal Masih, Jaswant Singh Khalra, Yitzhak Rabin, Sanjaasurengiyn Zorig, Juan Jose Gerardi, Jean Dominique, Carolos Cardoso, Filemon Lagman, Phoolan Devi, Pim Fortuyn, Jarallah Omar, Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev, Brian Williamson, Munir Said Thalib, FannyAnn Eddy, Deyda Hydera, Elmar Huseynov, Dorothy Stang, Filiberto Ojeda Rios, Anna Politkovskaya, Aleksandr Litvenenko, Hrant Dink, Gareth Williams, Benazir Bhutto, Gabriel Mkhumane, Tonderai Ndira, Natalya Estemirova, David Kato, Raymond Taavel, Sakine Cansiz, Avijit Roy, Boris Nemtsov, Diana Sacayan, Berta Caceres, Xulhaz Mannan, Marielle Franco, Arman Loni, Marc Angelucci, Freshta Kohistani, Ayanda Ngila, Nokuthula Mabaso, Lindokuhle Mnguni, and many others remind us that people continue to be assassinated for their visions of equality and goodness much more recently.

From this long list, which includes secular people as well as Christians, Muslims, and adherents of a variety of religious faiths and philosophies of life, we recognize brave actions that aggravated those who stood to lose financially, politically, socially, and in other ways if a more egalitarian ethos was adopted. Only a few

of these good people do we remember for their bravery. And even those we remember are not often honored by the masses of people with more than with lip service. Many condone their bravery, but few are willing to go and do likewise – even though oppressors continue to oppress.

Oppressors don't necessarily oppress for the sake of oppressing, but rather to get an advantage over others and so to make themselves more safe and secure. Their oppression is often hidden until prophets and civil rights advocates speak up and call out their oppression. Then their oppression becomes more overt, even though they often have others do their "dirty work."

It would be ironic if King David were the author of this Psalm as he speaks as though he is one of the oppressed rather than the oppressor that he was. We need only read the story of his dealings with Uriah, husband of Bathsheba, to see how ruthless he could be. Yet, many oppressors pretend that they are the ones oppressed when they are simply resisted for their injustices. David, for instance, was one who often saw God as being on his side. In other instances, we'd hear that he would claim that he was on God's side, when in actuality he was projecting his own views onto what he claimed to be God's side. Honestly, are all the murders, wars, corruption, and such that he did that he justified in God's name really what God would want? I find it baffling that many still revere David as a "man of God" when the evidence of his actions points to a different conclusion.

Still, there is some truth in these words about how to remain brave when trying to do the right thing. When we have the courage of our convictions, no matter the consequences, fear goes out the window. It is not that we don't fear what happens to us. We do. But we don't let that fear be the impetus for the decisions we make. We decide what is right to do, despite our fears. And that can put us on precarious ground.

When we do right for its own sake, using that as our criterion for why we act, there is no other criteria than can influence us and no enemies, human or otherwise, that can intimidate us. Verse 3 of this Psalm aptly notes the determination of one who believes oneself to be in the right – where even if an entire army rises against him as an individual, he will not succumb to letting fear decide his course of action. The reason being, of course, is that one is convinced that it is better to die for doing right than to live long in doing wrong.

Of course, this is a dangerous way of thinking. Not only might one die for one's convictions, what if one is wrong about one's convictions? I've known many people who think it is alright to persecute Blacks, LGBTQIA+ persons, women, Muslims, etc., all because their beliefs about these groups of people justify their oppression. I've known people who have claimed it is "for their own good," because we are helping them to see the light of truth – that just so happens to coincide with whatever they think about the world.

Good people and bad people can both use various methods to be fearless in whatever they do. Being fearless is not an end in itself. Having pure motives, ones that look out for the interests of others as well as one's own, and that put truth and justice, love and peace, above all other values, is the goal we are to work toward. Justifying our own better treatment over others is never pure; but is a part of self-deception that makes us feel good about ourselves even when we aren't really being good.

And so, we need to read these words of the Psalmist critically. What is the situation? Does it warrant this kind of confidence that the speaker is truly on God's side? Why does the person have adversaries, and what is their source of contention? Is it because they are just mean people, or is it because they feel they are being oppressed? It makes all the difference in our interpretation of these words whether they can ring true for us or not.

There are indications that maybe the Psalmist doesn't have pure motives. After all, while he would have us to believe (as in verse 4) that he wants only to "live in the house of God," a euphemism for living by God's values, which would indeed be a very pure motive, he then begins in verse 5 to portray that God is

on his side; and that God will do all of these things for him to protect him. Personally, I don't see God protecting the most virtuous people this world has ever known – starting with Jesus.

But we begin to see the real motives come out in verse 6 when he revels in the thought of being "lifted up above my enemies." Whenever you hear someone who is fine with being made superior to others, all purity of motive has disappeared. Sainly people don't want to see themselves as superior to others, but rather to see all as equals in worth, dignity, and moral considerability. Indeed, they don't see others as their "enemies," but rather as family and friends that they have not yet been able to cultivate a more peaceful relationship.

Verses 5-13 reveal that the focus is more on the author's own ego, self-congratulations, self-righteousness, and sense of esteem in the eyes of others than it is about doing the right thing for the right reasons. It's not that we haven't all been there ourselves at times, but whenever we come to revere reasons and motives that are not in accordance with God's virtues, but rather our own ego-laden desires, we allow ourselves to justify various sorts of evil for the "greater cause" of our own sense of self – not the genuinely greater cause of being good for its own sake.

Granted, the pure in heart will have many 'enemies' (that is, those who see them as an enemy), and perhaps even their parents will forsake them. Certainly, the pure in heart have had more than their share of "false witnesses" and those who were "breathing out violence." But the pure in heart do not imagine themselves "winning" over others, being "superior" to others, or celebrating one's "victories" over others – not even when others have egregiously done them wrong. They also don't perceive the world as God needing to choose between themselves and others – lifting themselves up, and squashing others. That is ego speaking, not God. The pure in heart see themselves as equals to others, and deserving no more than equal treatment to others. We don't see that kind of motive in many of these verses.

While we have good advice in the last verse for us to be patient in abiding (waiting) in God and God's values, and to be strong and courageous in doing so, we must question our own motives, as well as those of the Psalmist, to ensure that our courage is born of virtue not ego, and that our bravery is for doing justice and compassion for their own sakes and not for self-aggrandizement and a sense of superiority. Only then can God be our true light and salvation – when we act by those same virtues towards others, and show that same God-like unconditional love for others. May our motives be this pure.

— Rev. Bret S. Myers, 1/18/2023