

## **Delight yourself in the Lord ...**

Delight yourself in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart ... or will he? Delight yourself in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart ... is that really true? When I was a young Christian, I heard a sermon on this text that stuck in my mind. That is, that if you really are going to be an all out Christian, nay, a high-octane, v8, turbo-charged super-Christian, zealous and committed to the Lord, you can ask God for stuff and he'll give it you. In other words – get your life sorted out, then God will listen to your prayers and grant your desires! Very close to what is sometimes called, 'the prosperity Gospel' – love God and you'll find yourself materially blessed. Delight yourself in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart.

There is a Christian chorus that seems to celebrate the psalm in this way – delight yourself in the lord, and he'll give you the desires of your heart – and isn't it good to know that!

Okay – a more sensitive reading nowadays is to say something more along these lines: That if you delight yourself in the Lord, the desires of your heart will be transformed, so that your desires come into line with God's purpose for your life, and then – of course – God will grant those desires. But this is just as far from the psalmists intention as the cruder, prosperity interpretation. Again, if you read the psalm in this way – it is just not true. What is more, you turn it into something dangerous.

Well, it will take a few minutes to say why this is: In New Testament Scholarship, over the last century there have been two names that tower above all others. The first is a German existentialist scholar, Rudolf Bultmann. The second is currently the Bishop of Durham, Tom Wright. Obviously, Bultmann's thought has long since been known to many, but Tom Wright's is slowly becoming known. And with both figures, because they are such big names, sometimes they are hated without being understood, and sometimes they are worshipped without being critically assessed.

I focus today a little on Bultmann, because his legacy lives on – perhaps particularly at this church. The reason that he was disliked by many evangelicals was because he denied the historical resurrection, and all the miracles. They were an embarrassment to modern man – but instead of just getting rid of them, as his contemporaries did – Bultmann said no, we must interpret them. Because only when we interpret the crude worldviews of Scripture, and beliefs in miracles, and the historical context, can we get to the timeless truths that would be so glorious and enable us a dynamic relationship with God.

Now Bultmann's work is very exciting to read, and there is no denying – he is so brilliant that sometimes I would find myself smiling as I read. But there is a major major problem with his work. And it is this: that when you get rid of the context of scriptural claims, in an attempt to get to the timeless truth – you actually miss the real truth that is there.

Writing in pre-war Germany – (although he certainly never intended this) Bultmann effectively lifted Jesus out of his Jewish context. All the Jewishness of the New Testament, is stripped away to get to some timeless truth. And I can't help thinking that in pre-war Germany – at the time of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Reich – Bultmann helped to contribute to the solution of the so-called "Jewish problem in Germany". He offered the church a way of praying, thinking, worshipping and reading the bible, which got rid of the Jewishness of Scripture.

This is what happens, when historical context – which itself was god-given – is jettisoned in order to get to some hidden, timeless truth. The trouble is, whatever truth you might then arrive at, is not Scriptural – because scriptural truth is never timeless, but is rooted in history – in the story of what God is doing with his people.

In the end, it was not only embarrassing claims about miracles and healing that Bultmann has encouraged us to get rid of. It is more widely, that when you don't take the history into context, you are left with timeless truths which may sound pithy and wise – but which actually are no use to anyone. And even those who think that Bultmann is evil and horrible because he denied miracle, still follow his way of interpreting the bible – and today's psalm is the perfect example.

Delight yourself in the Lord, and he'll give you the desires of your heart. Well, if you ignore the context, the verses around it, the context in which it was written – you are left with a statement that has no connection whatsoever with what its writer intended. Delight yourself in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart. There was a television programme called Blackadder, which summarised perfectly how to misuse a text.

The context is the first world war – and Captain Blackadder is about to be tried for eating a pigeon. And his defence is given by lieutenant George, who sums up by reading the words : “I believe that like me, you will conclude that captain Blackadder is in fact, totally and utterly guilty...” And sits down – then Blackadder turns the page over – and George quickly leaps back to his feet, and continues “of nothing more than trying to do his duty under difficult circumstances.”

Delight yourself in the Lord, and he will give you the desire of your heart!: If you read this as a timeless truth, then it is simply not true for many thousands of saints throughout the history of the church. Many of them died horrible deaths, as they do today. Many good Christians are hungry and thirsty, and watch their families withering away under their very noses. To turn this verse into nice comfy middle-class Christians finding some form of happiness as a result of their Christian commitment is stupid, and it is anti-Christian. Reading the bible this way leaves us blissfully ignorant of the real world and our place within it.

So what was the psalmist talking about? If you read the whole psalm, the ‘desire of the heart’ is something very specific. It is about living in the land. This psalm is attributed to King David, the one who had established the Kingdom of Israel – and the logic of the psalm is simply – if Israel as a whole wants to stay in this land that they have inherited – then it is dependent upon being upon remaining faithful to God. The land was crucially important for the people of God, because having been a nomadic people – and then having been living insecurely in the land – they had only recently inherited a nation.

Now the prophets would later lament that settling down like this and finding security, inevitably lead the people to become comfortable and less dependent upon God. So this psalm attributed to David is a reminder – don't take this land for granted – if you want to stay here, it's not your divine right – your presence here is dependent upon your faithfulness to God. In fact, it is here, in verse 11, that is the origin of one of the beatitudes: blessed are the meek – because they will inherit the earth. Jesus like the psalmist, is not talking about planet earth – he is talking about the land where they live. And the meek were simply those people who did not own any land – they did not have a share in the land.

Delight yourself in the Lord – and he will let you stay in the land – but history shows that Israel did not stay in the Land – they were conquered, they were led into captivity, they were occupied by hostile forces. Delight yourself in the Lord, and he will give you the desire of your heart.

What does it mean to delight in the Lord? There is only one other place in the whole of Scripture where this phrase occurs – and it is in Isaiah 58, verses 13 and 14 – where it is celebrating Sabbath that is a delight in the Lord. And again – in this context also – staying in the land is dependent upon delighting in God, celebrating Sabbath.

To celebrate Sabbath has nothing to do with keeping Sunday special. To celebrate Sabbath is to spend time regularly in the presence of God, allowing every dimension of your humanity to be comforted and challenged and shaped and transformed by his living presence. In a hyperactive non-stop carrot and stick generation – to celebrate Sabbath is quite literally to stop. That is why in psalm 37, verse 7 uses that word for Sabbath – Stop – be still before the Lord. To celebrate Sabbath is to stop and be recommissioned – it is to be faithful in listening to God, so that your action in the world is just. It is to trust God that we might do good.

Now read the first half of that verse – trust in the lord and do good – dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture. Keep the Sabbath, and God will let you stay in the land... So now, at last, it becomes clear that verse 4 simply echoes verse 3. It means the same thing.

The next 25 years – communion!