

Present Tense Spirituality

Losing a present tense spirituality is dangerous. In Psalm 73, public figure Asaph lost a present tense spirituality and felt dangerously compromised. He could say the words – God is good to Israel! – but on a personal level he was captivated by the apparent prosperity of the wicked.

Their lives seemed to be unhindered and untainted, despite their arrogant dismissal of God. As he looked at their 'sports cars' and unhealthy habits, it looked like they simply grew old contentedly without any of the consequences that should come from their version of 'tax evasion, smoking and riotous living.'

What really stung Asaph was that if he were to express his thoughts, then he would be betraying a whole host of God's people who were looking to him for spiritual leadership. This is a peculiar vulnerability of any Christian leader. Somehow when we struggle, we feel an extra pressure to keep it hidden, so that others won't suffer too.

We might, like Asaph, struggle with the apparent good that others are receiving as they live for themselves. Envy of income, lifestyle, experience, and freedom can work powerfully as a silent killer in the heart of the Christian leader. They have given up everything to live for Christ, and gladly so. But gradually a sideways look can lead to the creeping cancer of envy. Unlike other more immediate struggles, this one can linger below the surface and suck the life out of a minister and their ministry.

There are other potential inner struggles that can undermine our ministry too. Struggles with gnawing temptation and secret sin. Struggles with doubt and fear. Struggles with discouragement and depression. These, and others like them, can lead us to the precarious precipice where Asaph stood... 'but as for me, my feet had almost slipped.'

Then everything seems to change. Actually, nothing really changes, except for Asaph's perspective: he begins to see clearly. The nudge he needed was to come to the sanctuary of God. Suddenly he could see clearly. What seemed so sure before was now very different. Now he could see that the wicked were in the precarious place because judgment is coming at any moment. He looked back and evaluated his earlier thought processes as being like those of a beast. Now he could see the end of the wicked and he could see his own values brought into sharp relief.

What happened? Asaph returned to a present tense spirituality.

Coming to the sanctuary woke him up because suddenly he was reminded that his God was not just a God he could affirm in word, but a God who was present to his life and experience. This was not just the God of Moses, nor just the God of his earlier zealous days, but the God who currently chose to dwell in the midst of His people. That sanctuary reminded Asaph of the present tense nature of life with God. Our God chooses to be involved in our lives, today.

Our spiritual walk will go dry when it is reduced to any of these four 'other tenses,' even though each is important:

1. The God of the historic past

It is important for us to know the historicity of God's dealings with humanity. We need to know that our faith is founded on the facts of God's self-revelation through the prophets and in His Son, especially by the reality of the resurrection. We need to know the 'past,' but we can't live there. Too easily, especially in the academic pursuit of theological and ministerial training, we can settle into a spirituality that is largely lived in reference to a God of the historic past. Study, but study in conversation with God who is pleased to fellowship with you in the today of your life and ministry.

2. The God of my personal past

It is important to remember how God has answered prayer and demonstrated his faithfulness in past years. Those times when you were drawn to live for Him and you found that God always gave more than you gave up for Him. Those times when all seemed lost and He came through in surprising ways. We mustn't lose track of our own history as this is the root system of our present identity and fellowship with God. However, when the present tense walk with Christ diminishes, then our personal past will not be enough to sustain a vibrant reality in the present. Reflect and thank God for His faithfulness over the years, but do so in conversation with God who is pleased to fellowship with you in the today of your life and ministry.

3. The God of my personal future

It is important to look forward to what may lie in the future and dream of what might transpire. God designed us to see needs and to ponder what might be done. Look at your ministry. What could be? What should be? What might be possible in the future? We can corrupt this forward look with aspirations for personal glory, but you have been transformed in your heart to creatively dream of what could bring glory to the God you love and want to please. Take time to dream, to imagine what might be possible, to ponder both the big ideas of ministry, and the amazing truth that God can do immeasurably beyond all that we ask or think. Do that, but do so in conversation with the God who is pleased to fellowship with you in the today of your life and ministry.

4. The God of our eternal future

It is important to look forward to life beyond this life, to life with God in the heavenly world of love. Too many Christians live without meaningful awareness of eternity to come. It tends to take persecution or loss to stir within us the hope for the home for which we were made – at home with Him. But we can also anticipate the wonders of all that is to come as some sort of 'retirement' from the busy lives we live in ministry now. And when that 'retirement' becomes the anticipation of being with Christ but only as a future hope, then something has broken in our spirits. The Bible offers us eternal perspective and hope for homecoming with our bridegroom, but always in such a way as to mark our present experience profoundly. Anticipate the wonders of eternity, but do so in conversation with the God who is pleased to fellowship with you in the today of your life and ministry.

Present Tense

We need all these perspectives in our walk with Christ, but never at the expense of a present walk with Christ. Asaph was reminded that God dwells in the midst of his people, he is present and involved. We need that same reminder. God is continually with us. He holds our right hand. He guides us with His counsel. Who do we have in heaven but God? What is there to desire on earth besides Him? Nothing. Our bodies, even our ministries, may fail, but God is the strength of our heart and our portion forever.

Bottom line in our spiritual life and ministry? For us, it is good to be near God, let us make Him our refuge. Present tense.



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