

June 7/8, 2003

Psalms of Life, VII

Leaders & Followers: After the Battles

Psalm 21

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Let's imagine this morning that I am a sculptor, and I sculpt this world-class sculpture. But I'm so into my sculpting that I really don't have time to take it out and show it. So I hire you to be my presenter, and you are supposed to take it to museums and art shows. You agree to do that and you start taking it out, and because it's really quite spectacular it soon is the talk of the art world. All of a sudden you have all these engagements with museums and art shows, and you are starting to get write-ups in the paper and in various magazines.

At first, sometimes people confuse you for the sculptor and they start asking you, "How did you do this... and where did you get this idea?" You are quick to respond that you're not the sculptor. But after a while you start to get bored with all this and you start fielding some of the questions. You start telling people it really wasn't that hard...and just where I got the idea...and how I did this and that. Pretty soon it's starting to sound like you're the sculptor.

Then I start seeing these write-ups in the paper where it sounds like *you're* the sculptor. It seems like you're convincing yourself that you made this. But *you* didn't make it; *I* did. You are just the presenter. Then you make your fatal mistake: you agree to go on a nationwide talk show. While on that talk show, they ask you to give a little demonstration. By this time you have convinced yourself that you're the sculptor. "Sure," you say, "I'll do that." And it only takes about two minutes before everybody knows you're a fake, a phony. You don't know how to sculpt; you can barely carve a stick of butter!

You say, "What a crazy story. That would never happen." Are you sure about that? Are you sure you aren't guilty of that? In Ephesians chapter 2 we are told that we are a trophy of God's grace. In other words, He's the sculptor; we're just the presenters. But sometimes we forget that. Sometimes, as time passes, we start to think maybe we made ourselves—that we've carved ourselves into this trophy of grace. We start to think we're pretty good. We've performed well and we start to think of ourselves as *little* sinners and other people as *big* sinners, and we forget that we are simply a product of God's grace.

I think the people that are most prone to lose their perspective are leaders. We're the most prone to start to take credit for things that God has done—as if we did them. As I mentioned last week, when I say "leaders" I'm talking about pastors and elders, youth leaders, LifeGroup leaders, parents, leaders out in the marketplace—any leader that influences other people.

You see, the problem with leaders is, not only do we have to deal with our own perspective, but we have to deal with the perspective of our followers. Sometimes the perspective of our followers gets all messed up, and that starts to mess up the perspective of the leader. Our followers sometimes start to say, "Wow, you did that. Wow, you're really great!" You start to hear that and think, *Well, maybe I **am** the sculptor.*

It's really important that we maintain, or keep, our theology right in terms of what we believe as a people of grace. One of the best ways to explain it is to imagine that I am a millionaire, and there's a worthy charity over at the mall that I want to give some money to. So I ask for three volunteers. I write a check for \$100, and I give it to the first volunteer and say, "Just go to the mall and drop it off." Then to the second volunteer I give \$1000 and say, "You

just take it to the mall; drop it off." And to the third volunteer I give \$10,000 and say, "Just take it to the mall; drop it off."

Now in here, as we witness this, we all have the right perspective. The \$10,000 person isn't greater than the \$100 person. They're just volunteers; they just came. The only difference is I gave this person a check for \$100 and this person a check for \$10,000. That's the only difference. So they have no basis to think they're any better than anybody else. The problem isn't in here. The problem is what's going to happen when they get to the mall.

The \$100 person is going to get to the mall and drop off that check, and the people are going to say, "Thank you very much. It's very nice of you. You're very generous."

Then the \$1000 person is going to show up and drop off the check. People are going to say, "That is *very* generous. You are very special. *Thank you* for that gift!"

Then we really get into trouble when this person walks up with a gift for \$10,000. They're going to say, "Unbelievable! You are *so* incredible!" They say, "Call the newspaper; call the radio station!" Pretty soon the reporters come out and they ask you all these questions. They're basically saying, "You are great!"

You hear that and you start to think, *Hmmm...I guess I am. I guess I am!* You see, the problem is those people are messing with your head, and it doesn't take long before you start to believe some of that. But the reality is the \$10,000 person was no different than the \$100 person. The only difference is just the size of the check I gave you to take over there. You are just presenters; I'm the giver.

All of us in the body have different roles. Some are up front and some are behind the scenes. There are some that are much more prone to be like this \$10,000 one, where people say, "Wow! You are special. You're really important. You're really good!" I happen to have one of those roles. There's the potential for people to think my role is more important than someone else's role. People start to say that and they start to think that. And those who follow the leaders start to mess with the leaders' heads.

I do believe I have a high and holy calling. I do believe that my role in this body is very significant; it's very important. But I believe the same thing is true of *you*. I believe you have a high and holy calling. I believe what you do for this body is very important, and I do not believe my role is higher than your role. I just need to be faithful to deliver my check and you need to be faithful to deliver your check. I'm not the sculptor; I'm just the presenter. God is the sculptor. That's the theology of the people of grace.

When I think about my role in the body, I realize that I like to be encouraged. I like to be affirmed. I like people to say, "I appreciate what you do for this body." But I want people to think of me in the same way they would think of the nursery workers. We need to affirm them. We need to appreciate their role in the body. So we view everybody the same way, as a people of grace, because God is the sculptor and we're just the presenters.

You remember the PTL scandal with Jim and Tammy Bakker about 20 years ago, when that whole ministry was exposed and came tumbling down. It's interesting to go back and read about the very early days of Jim and Tammy's ministry. I believe they were very sincere. I believe they very much wanted to build the Kingdom. I believe God gave them some gifts that He blessed. But somewhere along the way, the followers started to say, "You're special. You're great. I don't know what we'd do without you!" And they started to believe that.

Pretty soon they believed it and so did their followers, and the whole thing came crashing down. I believe their followers are just as responsible as their leaders, because they both lost perspective and they both set themselves up for defeat.

It's interesting, when you think about this, that the times when we lose our perspective are typically not going to be those moments *before* the battle. I think we tend to be pretty focused then. No, when we lose our perspective is *after* God gives a great victory. That's when we tend to sometimes lose sight of God and start focusing on His instrument. We start looking at people as if *they* were the ones who did this, and everything starts getting messed up.

That's what is so great about Psalm 21. Last week we talked from Psalm 20 about the mindset of these people before the battle. They were very concerned that their king was right before God, because that would determine God's blessing and that was their only hope of victory. So we talked about how that king needed to be dependent upon God and he needed to have a deep faith. He needed to practice the presence of God and he needed to be authentic in his worship. The king needed to have pure motives and be a person of prayer. That was their prayer and their desire for this king. And because that was true of him, God gave them a great victory.

It would be very easy coming out of that victory to start saying, "We have a great king. We have a victorious king. Long live the king!" But that's not what they said. Here in Psalm 21 there is a message for both leaders and followers, as we see how the people responded to this great victory.

I mentioned last week that one of the elements of interpretation we sometimes look for is what is called an inclusio—meaning the first verse and the last verse basically say the same thing—which tells you these are the bookends that define the theology in-between. We had it in Psalm 20; we have it again in Psalm 21. The first verse and the last verse basically say the same thing, and that really identifies what the theology is about.

There is some discussion among scholars as to whether or not Psalm 20 and 21 go together. Most scholars think that they do, and it seems to me to be fairly obvious. As a matter of fact, when we walk through this, it's fairly easy to go back and forth between the two psalms and see the connection. Psalm 20 was before the battle. Now the great victory has been won and the people respond after the battle.

O LORD, in Your strength the king will be glad, and in Your salvation how greatly he will rejoice! (Psalm 21:1, NASB)

That should sound familiar because it showed up in Psalm 20, verse 6:

Now I know that the LORD saves [that's this salvation]...with the saving strength of His right hand. (NASB)

Before the battle the people understood that salvation would come from God and strength for the battle would come from God. Now the battle is over and they still believe the same theology: salvation came from God; strength came from God. Their focus is exactly right.

Psalm 21, verse 2a:

You have given him his heart's desire. (NASB)

Psalm 20, verse 4a:

May He grant you your heart's desire. (NASB)

This is what the king desired. That's what God gave him.

Psalm 21, verse 2b:

And You have not withheld the request of his lips. (NASB)

Psalm 20, verse 5:

May the LORD fulfill all your petitions. (NASB)

This is what he asked. This is how God answered.

For You meet him with the blessings of good things. (Psalm 21:3a, NASB)

Now the people are going to list the good things that God has done for the king.

You set a crown of fine gold on his head. (Psalm 21:3b, NASB)

That perspective is exactly right. God is the ultimate King. It is God's Kingdom. *He* chose to set this crown on David's head. In other words, David was just lined up among the people. God said, "You're going to have a \$10,000 role—not more valuable, but just different." And so God set a crown on this king's head.

He asked life of You, You gave it to him, length of days forever and ever.
(v. 4, NASB)

When the kings went to the battle, they didn't sit back in the palace and call on a cell phone to see how the battle was going. They were on the frontlines. It wasn't unusual for a king to perish in battle. He prayed for life and God gave him life. The statement "length of days forever and ever" is probably a hint of the Davidic Covenant in 2 Samuel 7, where David was promised that his kingdom would endure forever. Christ, of course, was the ultimate fulfillment of that promise, and there's a hint of that.

His glory is great through Your salvation, splendor and majesty You place upon him. (v. 5, NASB)

There is the realization that when the king wins this great battle, he is going to experience the glory that goes with the victory. He is going to experience the splendor and majesty that comes when God delivers His people. But the people are very focused on, *This is from God; this is God's glory; it's His salvation.* And the king just reflects it because of God's faithfulness.

For You make him most blessed forever; You make him joyful with gladness in Your presence. (v. 6, NASB)

When you go through those first six verses, it is just amazing to me how well these people maintain their perspective. It would not be hard, coming out of this great victory, to look at the king and say, "Wow, the king is great. The *king* delivered us; the *king* is mighty; the *king* is powerful. Long live the king!" and begin to lose their perspective. But they understood going in that it wasn't the king at all; it was God! The king just needed to be faithful.

What's so great about this psalm is that the people came out of this victory with the same theology. What they believed going in is what they believe coming out: That it is God—not their king—who is great.

I think we understand the fact that we live in a culture of celebrities. Whenever we talk about celebrities it pushes a button with me. It's a point of irritation with me because I don't find celebrities heroic. Just because they appear on television or stand behind a camera or sing some song, I don't find anything terribly noble about that. I think heroes are schoolteachers and parents and doctors and nurses and law enforcement people—real people in the trenches. I think

heroes are children's workers and youth workers and people building God's Kingdom. I don't care about celebrities. I don't care about the lifestyles of the rich and famous. I don't care where they live; I don't care what their hobbies are; I don't care if they're getting married for the tenth time; I don't care if they've been abducted by aliens—I don't care about any of that. I don't care about their political opinions. I just don't care.

But our culture cares. We live in a culture of celebrity. And the real irritation is when that value system moves into the Kingdom. In a culture of grace, there are no celebrities. None! We are merely the presenters and He is the sculptor. We simply need to be faithful with our calling, whatever it is. There should be no celebrities.

In the last 20 years of the Christian culture, we have definitely entered into a culture of celebrities. We have our celebrity preachers; we have our celebrity authors; we have our celebrity musicians. And oftentimes who is messing them up are the followers. The followers are losing sight of something and they're turning these people into celebrities. They have lost their focus of grace.

I don't believe Billy Graham is any more important to the Kingdom than Gloria Edgar, who runs our nursery. I don't think in God's eyes his calling is any more noble than hers. I don't think Billy Graham thinks it is either. He's one of the few that has refused to really be a celebrity. He just wants to be faithful, and he has been true to his calling. There are a lot of preachers who say the right thing in public, but in private they want to be treated like a celebrity—because they've lost their theology of grace.

One of the best ways to maintain our perspective, both as leaders and followers, is never to forget what God has done for us. I must never forget that He's the sculptor and I'm the presenter. I am nothing more than a trophy of His grace. *He* has done the work.

Keep your thumb in Psalm 21 and flip over to Luke 17, beginning in verse 11. There's an interesting event that happened which Jesus comments on, and it serves as a good reminder for us to keep our perspective.

...While He [meaning Jesus] was on the way to Jerusalem, He was passing between Samaria and Galilee. As He entered a village, ten leprous men, who stood at a distance, met Him; and they raised their voices, saying, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" When He saw them, He said to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." And as they were going, they were cleansed. Now one of them, when he saw that he had been healed, turned back, glorifying God with a loud voice, and he fell on his face at His feet, giving thanks to Him. And he was a Samaritan. Then Jesus answered and said, "Were there not ten cleansed? But the nine—where are they? Was no one found who returned to give glory to God, except this foreigner?" And He said to him, "Stand up and go; your faith has made you well." (Luke 17:11-19, NASB)

You know, it would be one thing if Luke just recorded this. But I find it very interesting that it was Jesus Himself who raised the issue. When the one came back, it was Jesus Himself who said, "Hey, wait a minute! Weren't there ten of you? Where are the other nine?"

Now, I don't know that you can make a lot out of the numbers here, but it is sobering to realize 90 percent of them forgot. Whether they thought they healed themselves or they didn't care, the crisis was over and they just went on their way. Only one out of ten came back and fell on his face and gave glory to Jesus and said, "*You* did this."

It's also interesting that the one who came back was a Samaritan. No question, the Samaritan would have been the least likely of them all to believe that Jesus would do anything for him. I think those that are at the greatest risk for forgetting are those of us who have been Christians a long time, especially those of us who have been raised in Christian homes. That's all we've ever known, and we start to cultivate an air of self-righteousness. We start to forget that this is all God; we are just a product of His grace.

I'm sure you would agree with me, *I want to be numbered among the one who remembers*. Every day I want to fall on my face before God and remember *He* did this. That's what makes the response of the people in Psalm 21 so wonderful. Their theology after the victory was the same as their theology going into the victory. They remembered that, *This is all God*.

Because of the response of the followers, the king maintained *his* perspective. It's recorded in verse 7:

For the king trusts in the LORD, and through the lovingkindness of the Most High he will not be shaken. (NASB)

Because the people kept their perspective, the king kept his perspective—which meant they were right where they needed to be for the next battle. And that's what the rest of the psalm talks about. It talks about God being the One who delivers His people.

Your hand will find out all your enemies; Your right hand will find out those who hate you. You will make them as a fiery oven in the time of your anger; the LORD will swallow them up in His wrath, and fire will devour them. Their offspring You will destroy from the earth, and their descendants from among the sons of men. Though they intended evil against You and devised a plot, they will not succeed. For You will make them turn their back; You will aim with Your bowstrings at their faces. Be exalted, O LORD, in Your strength; we will sing and praise Your power. (vv. 8-13, NASB)

These people understood there would be more battles. And when it was time to go into the next battle, they needed to have the same attitude and the same theology: That their king needed to be right and they needed to be right. And God would give them the victory.

It all starts when we as individuals remember we are trophies of God's grace. It means we don't start thinking, *I did this; I'm a product of my own goodness; I'm a product of me*. But rather, we realize that we are a product of God's grace. You could basically take the whole situation in Psalm 20 and 21 that talks about literal land, a literal army, and a literal battle and understand that the exact same principles are true today as we fight in a spiritual arena against a spiritual enemy. The principles are the same. If we are not dependent upon God, we will not win.

The problem is when God gives us victories, sometimes it messes with our heads. Sometimes we come out of those thinking, *I did this*. And sometimes the problem is with the followers when they start to point at their leaders and say, "Wow, he's really important. Wow, he's really good. I don't know what we'd do without him!"

I have to admit there's a part of that I really like to hear. It feeds a certain part of me, and I start thinking, *Well, yeah, I guess I am pretty important*. And that's the problem. Don't mess with me. Don't mess up my head. Don't treat me that way. Please don't put your leaders on a pedestal. They are just products of grace, like you. We all have our calling. We all need to be

faithful. We come together as a team to accomplish the mission. But sometimes the followers are messing up the leaders, because they've lost sight of this theology of grace.

I'm convinced that oftentimes God limits the victories He gives us because neither the leaders nor the followers can handle it. Just imagine what would happen if God knew that both the leaders and followers would maintain their Psalm 21 perspective. He could give them these incredible victories, and the people would keep their perspective right and keep their focus on God, making sure He gets the glory. Just think about what God might want to do.

I gave some thought as to who in my life has modeled this for me. One of the people that comes to my mind would be Theodore Epp, who was the founder of Back to the Bible. The Epps and my parents were good friends, and the Epps were in our home often. Now I say this with all respect: Theodore Epp was a very ordinary man; he was not impressive at all. He wasn't impressive to look at; he didn't have a real charismatic personality; he didn't have most of the attributes that you would think of for an effective leader. If he was in a crowd, you'd look at him and say, "Ordinary."

But there was one area where he was *extraordinary*, and that was this: He was a man who walked with God. And everybody around him knew that to be true. This was a man that lived every day in brokenness and humility, and he walked with God. This was a man who never allowed himself to become a celebrity. The people around him knew that he didn't want them to make him into one. And because he maintained that attitude, God used him to do one amazing thing after another. He literally touched the world!

Toward the end of David's life, David forgot about Psalm 20 and 21. David started thinking about multiplying horses and chariots, and he started counting his army to see if they were big enough. And God rebuked him. This is what Theodore Epp wrote about that:

This last attack of Satan upon David took place about 38 years after David ascended the throne and about two years before his death...

Ordinarily nothing would be wrong with numbering the people. Census taking is done periodically by any alert government. But numbering the Children of Israel was a matter of pride. David wanted to know how strong his nation was militarily. His strength was really in God, but David was putting his trust in his armies when he numbered the people. God's advice was, "You do not need to number the people. I have taken care of this situation." The strength of Israel's army meant nothing if God was not with them.

The same is true in our spiritual life. Until we can say with true conviction, "I am nothing," God cannot do much for us. - Theodore Epp, *Strength for the Journey*, p. 223

Not only did Theodore Epp write those words, he lived them. He believed that with all his heart. He believed that he was nothing but a product of God's grace.

Whether we are leaders or followers, may the same be said of us: That in the greatest moments of victory we will together say, "To God be the glory!"

Our Father, we are thankful that You are the God of victory. You are the sculptor and we are merely the product of Your grace. Lord, it is easy to lose our perspective and to forget who did what. Lord, I pray that we might truly understand what it means to trust You, not only before the battles, but after the great victories—that as the Samaritan, we might be on our faces, broken before You, thankful for what You have done for us. Lord, may we be a people who collectively say, "To God be the Glory!" In Jesus' name, Amen.