

**When the Righteous Cry Out:
The Hope and Challenge of Psalm 34**

*The righteous cry out, and the Lord hears,
And delivers them out of all their troubles.*

-Psalm 34:17

What do you do when you feel like there's unfairness in your life? How do you handle that nagging suspicion that justice is not being served? Is the first thing you do ask, "Could I be wrong?" "Could I be interpreting this situation incorrectly?" "Am I part of the problem?" If not, it might be worth considering—even just to rule it out.

I offer this because people tend to move through this life with one standard in mind, at least at first. And that is *our* standard, calibrated according to our own wants and needs. The standards by which we evaluate the events in our lives tend to be based on how they impact us, rather than whether they are truly fair or warranted. If we never evaluate these benchmarks of right and wrong, fair and unfair, we risk moving through life making unsound appraisals.

Our psalm this morning says that the "righteous" cry out and the Lord hears. But what about in our moments of self-righteousness? Those times when believe that we *alone* are right and that our indignation parallels objective reality. How can we safeguard against this?

Growing in true righteousness requires humility. As we read in Arcana Coelestia 6866:

When real humility is present in a person they surrender all power to think or do anything by themselves and abandon themselves completely to the Divine, and in this condition draw near to the Divine.

We are called repeatedly throughout the Word of the Old and New Testaments and the Heavenly Doctrine to humble ourselves before the knowledge that of the self we can do nothing. This includes appraising what is right and wrong, just, and fair.

But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. (Matt 6:33)

What are "all these things?" various elements of natural, moral, emotional, and spiritual sustainment. It is God's kingdom that we are called to seek, not one of our establishment alone. It is God's righteousness that we are called to seek, not some metric of our own invention. As the psalm promises, "No one who trusts in Him shall be condemned."

Righteousness is an ongoing endeavor. From the Apocalypse Revealed passage 815:

Someone who believes that they are righteous and so are living a good life without living in accordance with truths is much deceived. For a person cannot be reformed and regenerated and so become good, except by means of truths and by a life in accordance with those truths.

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You might like to know that the word translated here as “righteous” is other times translated as “just” or “fair.” Maybe that language makes it a little easier for us to grasp what’s being elevated in these teachings. We ought to seek justice. As we read in Micah 6:8:

He has shown you, O man, what is good; And what does the Lord require of you But to do justly, To love mercy, And to walk humbly with your God?

Being someone who seeks justice means more than merely demanding it for oneself. It means *being* just in how we live and bringing justice in how we work with others. If we look again, we’ll see that justice is our focus in the psalm. Unlike some other psalms we could examine, this one does not detail injustice, but instead provides a shorthand for how a person can be righteous:

- Praise the Lord (verse 1)
- Trust the Lord (verse 8)
- Seek the Lord (verse 10)
- Teach and Learn of the Lord (verse 11)
- Speak only what is true (verse 13)
- Be a peacemaker (verse 14)
- Call on the Lord (verse 17)

The Psalm reminds us, though, that we’ll have our share of troubles along the way. Recall it is the righteous who are doing the crying out.

I think sometimes we get it into our heads that if we do everything right, if we follow the invitation of Psalm 34, then we’ll merit serenity. That if we ourselves seek to be fair in how we handle the people around us, we too will be handled fairly. Maybe it sounds naïve, however I think we need look no further than the feelings of indignation that often arise whenever we feel slighted.

This is why the Lord reminds us of such unfortunate realities about our natural life, such as

Sufficient for the day is the evil thereof... (Matt 6:34)

And

In this world you will have trouble... (John 16:33)

We know these things and yet if we truly believe them why are we taken by surprise when they come true? Why does it catch us off guard when things go wrong and we say, “I did everything I was supposed to?” Do you ever gripe like this? We almost feel betrayed! But in the Gospel of Mark, when Lord offered the signs that would follow His believers, he said:

In My name they will cast out demons; they will speak with new tongues; they will take up serpents; and if they drink anything deadly, it will by no means hurt them; they will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover. (16:17-18)

Even having their faith, there are still dangerous situations to contend with. The promise of faith is not one of a peaceful retreat, but that if we stay committed, the Lord will keep our spirit safe, even when we are unable to see the progress that is being made.

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But the Lord knows that we can lose confidence in His providence when we stare injustice in the face. From *New Jerusalem and its Heavenly Doctrine*:

People who think about divine providence in worldly terms come to the conclusion that it applies only on the largest scale, but that the details are left to us. But people who think this way do not know the mysteries of heaven. They draw their conclusions solely on the basis of self-love, love for the world, and the things that give pleasure to these loves. So when they see evil people raised to high rank, making more money than good people, and skillfully and successfully accomplishing evil things, they say in their hearts that none of this would be happening if divine providence were operative in all the details. They fail to take into account, though, that the goal of divine providence does not concern what is momentary and transient, what comes to an end when our lives in this world cease. Rather, its goal concerns what lasts to eternity, what therefore does not have an end[...] (NJHD 269)

When we do deeds that we know to be good because we have read about them in the truths of our church— When we make those truths the guiding principles of our existence— When we use those teachings as our standard, we are inviting the Lord down into our lives. But not as a talisman we can cling to, or a merit badge we can wear and make ours and say “I was righteous once—” or “I was just once—” or “I was fair once—” “Therefore, I’m always righteous, just, or fair.”

No. It can't be attached to us, but it can be present with us. It feels like a tall order at first, but every interaction we have, no matter how inconsequential it seems, can be a moment where we make space for the Lord and His righteousness. True Christianity teaches:

The truth is that the Lord's righteousness, being such in its nature and origin, and being in itself purely Divine, cannot be conjoined to any person, and thus cannot effect salvation any otherwise than as the Divine life can, which is Divine love and Divine wisdom. With these the Lord enters into every person; but unless a person is living in accordance with order, that life, although it is in them, contributes nothing whatever to their salvation; it imparts merely an ability to understand truth and do good. To live according to order is to live according to God's commandments; and when a person so lives and so does, they acquire for themselves righteousness-not the righteousness of the Lord's redemption, but the Lord Himself as righteousness. (96)

When we cry out in hard times, when we feel afflicted, or that things are unfair, we have the Lord beside us. He provides what we need to sustain us. He inspires what we need to slow and eventually stop any patterns of harm that might be present in our own lives and families and communities. Righteousness can be with us even when—and maybe even *especially* when we feel like we need to cry out.

When we are distant from the Lord, we run the risk of becoming the agents of harm in other people's lives. When we act in ways that leave other people feeling low, or when we do things that impede justice and fairness for others, we push back on the Lord's presence and set ourselves against righteousness. In those times, because of our choices, He is closer to those who are on the

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receiving end of our aggression, or our wrath, or our carelessness. We set ourselves against not only another person, but against righteousness and justice itself – that is, the Lord.

But this is all appearance. The Lord doesn't move. He neither changes His tune nor his position. His truth is firm and His love is constant. The question is not “Where is God” but rather “Where are we?”

Whether the Lord is close to us depends not on His willingness but ours. Which is the same as saying our relationship with the Lord depends on willingness to be loving, kind, principled, and to embody the truths we know in the good actions of life. This is what it means to say that “the life of religion is to do good.” (Life 1).

I invite you to ask yourself this question: “When am I the closest to the Lord?” This might be a hard question to answer because being close to the Lord doesn't mean everything will go our way. Simply having the one who IS, WAS, and IS TO COME by our side does not guarantee an easy life. But what it does guarantee is we have the strength to move through hard times without losing our commitments to our principles.

We are called to try to make this place a little bit more like heaven by inviting the Lord into our lives. True Christianity 422 reminds us that:

Charity itself is acting justly and faithfully in the office, business, and employment in which a person is engaged, and those with whom the person has any dealings.

We have the freedom to choose, do we connect ourselves with heaven through embodying those principles and our actions that really speak of heaven? Do we connect ourselves with the Lord by trying to be righteous and invite righteousness into our lives, or do we push those away and take on the opposite? The choice is very much ours. And the Lord is always on our side, either strengthening us as we do good or calling us to do better.

How do we move forward together? Can we, as Psalm 34 directs, magnify the Lord together? Can we exalt his name together? True Christian Religion 100 teaches us about this partnership:

A real partnership is not possible unless it happens mutually and reciprocally. Therefore the Lord's partnership with us is mutual and reciprocal, [...] This partnership comes about as we move closer to the Lord and the Lord moves closer to us; for it is a fixed and unchangeable law that the closer we move toward the Lord, the closer the Lord moves toward us.

It is in this closeness that we find that we enable the Lord to, as Psalm 34 puts it, deliver us from our fears, save us from our troubles, surround us with his angels, and deliver us.

If we ever find ourselves calling out to the Lord in our righteousness, wondering why we still have trouble despite doing our best, the simple answer is troubles come because not everybody's committing themselves to the Lord. Not everyone's participating. Can we remember in these times that the Lord's Providence is working all things to a good end? That even if we can't see it, He *is* working in this world?

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This is why we pray:

“Thy Kingdom Come. Thy will be done, as in heaven so upon the earth.”

What’s so inspiring about our teachings about heaven is that it paints a picture of a world where everyone has committed themselves to be of service to their neighbor and their God, and therefore troubles don’t arise because there aren't people making trouble. In our weaker moments on this earth, the vision can feel more like a fantasy. But in our stronger more righteous moments, we see the reality of the Lord’s promise. We ally with the Him and bring healing and stability.

This is why the Psalm, in its eternal optimism, sings:

*I will bless the Lord at all times;
His praise shall continually be in my mouth.
My soul shall make its boast in the Lord;
The humble shall hear of it and be glad.
Oh, magnify the Lord with me,
And let us exalt His name together.
- Psalm 34:1-3*

Amen

Lessons:

Psalm 34; Matt 6:25-34; True Christian Religion 68