

The Parallel Universe of Praise

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Revelation 1:1-6 RSV

The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants what must soon take place; and he made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, who bore witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw.

Blessed is he who reads aloud the words of the prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written therein; for the time is near.

John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, and from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the first-born of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth. To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen.

Preston Grintsch, owner of the Acme Products Company, was a pretty nasty person. He wasn't honest with his employees. He took advantage of them, always promising them more and then giving them less. Whenever he made mistakes in the business he pinned the blame on the people who worked for him. Business wasn't that great, yet he built himself a large, fancy house, always drove an expensive car, and went on golf outings leaving others to run things. He had no concern for anyone's welfare but his own, and never darkened the church's door.

Finally, when production costs began to catch up with him, Preston Grintsch called into his office two of his most loyal and hard-working managers, Malcolm Plainer and Conyer Blessing.

"Acme Products is going to tank if we don't cut costs right away." Grintsch told them. "I'm holding you responsible. You've mismanaged your departments. As of today, you're through. I'm putting my son-in-law in charge of both of your departments. Go clean your desks, and Security will show you out."

Malcolm Plainer was the first to arrive home that day, fuming with anger. "That Grintsch is a louse," he told his wife. "Skimping on our salaries while he drives that Mercedes and lives in that posh house. Then blaming me when things go wrong because of *his* bad decisions. It's not fair."

"Now, Malcolm," said his wife. "We just have to trust the Lord, like our pastor says—"

"*Trust the Lord!*" Malcolm burst out. "What's the Lord ever done for us? I've slaved for Acme Products for years, and the only one to benefit from it has been Preston Grintsch, that conniving unbeliever—and his worthless son-in-law! It just seems it's the bad guys that get all the breaks while those of us that follow the rules get the shaft."

On the other side of town, Conyer Blessing pulled into the driveway and walked calmly to the front door. "Honey," he called, "I'm home early. Guess what? I need to look for a new job."

"What happened?" asked his wife. "Did that creepy boss of yours do something stupid? I hope he gets what's coming to him!"

"Now, Sweetheart," said Conyer. "Let's not worry about Preston Grintsch. The Lord will deal with *him*. We need to pray for his salvation."

"Yes—but what about us? and what about all that time you put in at Acme, down the drain!"

"Nothing we do is ever wasted when you do it for the Lord," answered Conyer Blessing. "Remember, we don't always see the big picture, but he does. This could all work out for our good. I'm disappointed about losing my job, but we can't let that get us down. After all, I still have what's important—I have you, and our family, and we have lots of wonderful memories. And we have our faith. Like our pastor says, we just need to keep on trusting God."

* * *

Each of us has had an experience like that of Malcolm and Conyer, where someone took advantage of us—or misused or mistreated people we love—but then they seemed to prosper and get along quite well. Meanwhile you and I, who try to do what's right, have a constant struggle with finances or other issues.

Or perhaps you've looked around and seen so many people that are indifferent to the Lord, totally ignoring him and never taking part in the church. Yet they're healthy, doing well financially, well liked in the community. Meanwhile we who've been faithful to God have had to struggle with health issues, family matters, perhaps even not being successful in our careers or even accepted by people around us.

Several years ago something happened to me like what happened to Malcolm Plainer and Conyer Blessing. I was part-time dean of a graduate school, but an administrative problem developed which the head of the school thought was my responsibility. So he asked me to resign. It was a humiliating experience. I felt like I'd been kicked.

That man went on to build up his school, write more books, launch new projects, and be written up in Christian magazines as an authority in his field. Meanwhile I struggled on as a relative unknown. A few years later I wrote a book I thought would establish my name as a writer. But it was what's called a "work for hire," and technically I wasn't the author. So the publisher decided to put a fictitious author's name on it. Then *Christianity Today* published a glowing review of the book—without mentioning me! My claim to fame went up in smoke. Again I got shafted.

I'm not saying that man I worked with is a creep like Preston Grintsch in our story. Far from it! And I'm not saying those publishers were unethical; it was within their rights to do what they did. But my resentment over the fame and success of others, partly at my expense—while I struggle on in obscurity—has been something I've had to deal with over the years. Maybe you've had to deal with an issue like this in your life.

In the Bible we meet people who struggle with a similar kind of resentment. They see the prosperity of the wicked, who don't pay any attention to the Lord, and they wonder why others get along so well while the believer gets the short end of the stick. One of those people is Asaph, who composed Psalms 50 and 73-83.

Asaph was King David's musician. When David had the Ark of God brought up to Jerusalem, he appointed Asaph to lead the praise in the tabernacle he set up on Zion, with both instruments and singing. That's all recorded in 1 Chronicles:

Moreover he appointed certain of the Levites as ministers before the ark of the LORD, to invoke, to thank, and to praise the LORD, the God of Israel. Asaph was the chief, and second to him were Zechariah, Jeiel, Shemiramoth, Jehiel, Mattithiah, Eliab, Benaiah, Obedom, and Jeiel, who were to play harps and lyres; Asaph was to sound the cymbals and Benaiah and Jahaziel the priests were to blow trumpets continually, before the ark of the covenant of God. (1 Chronicles 16:4-6)

Later on, in 2 Chronicles 29:30, Asaph is called a *seer* or prophet, because the Israelite prophets were musicians. In the Bible, singing and playing instruments are forms of prophecy in the Bible—we have our own prophets here in this congregation!

The Bible doesn't tell us anything about Asaph's personal life. Evidently he had his problems that led to bitterness and resentment. But because he was prophet he also heard from the Lord and received an answer that helped him deal with his problems. Listen to what Asaph wrote in Psalm 73:

*Truly God is good to the upright, to those who are pure in heart.
But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled, my steps had well nigh slipped.
For I was envious of the arrogant, when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.
For they have no pangs; their bodies are sound and sleek.
They are not in trouble as other men are; they are not stricken like other men.
Therefore pride is their necklace; violence covers them as a garment.
Their eyes swell out with fatness, their hearts overflow with follies.
They scoff and speak with malice; loftily they threaten oppression.
They set their mouths against the heavens, and their tongue struts through the earth.
Therefore the people turn and praise them; and find no fault in them.
And they say, "How can God know? Is there knowledge in the Most High?"
Behold, these are the wicked; always at ease, they increase in riches.
All in vain have I kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence.
For all the day long I have been stricken, and chastened every morning (Psalm 73:1-14).*

Sounds like our friend Malcolm Plainer, doesn't it? But Asaph continues:

*If I had said, "I will speak thus," I would have been untrue to the generation of thy children.
But when I thought how to understand this, it seemed to me a wearisome task,
until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I perceived their end.
Truly thou dost set them in slippery places; thou dost make them fall to ruin.
How they are destroyed in a moment, swept away utterly by terrors! (Psalm 73:15-19).*

Do you get the insight Asaph is providing us here? He says that when he went into the sanctuary of God, the place of worship, he began to see things differently. He saw how stupid he had been to complain about his lot. He understood that he was much better off than the people who had wronged him, because he was living in fellowship with God. In Psalm 73 Asaph goes on to say this:

*When my soul was embittered, when I was pricked in heart,
I was stupid and ignorant, I was like a beast toward thee.
Nevertheless I am continually with thee; thou dost hold my right hand.
Thou dost guide me with thy counsel, and afterward thou wilt receive me to glory.
Whom have I in heaven but thee? And there is nothing upon earth that I desire besides thee.
(Psalm 73:21-25)*

What made the difference for Asaph? What enabled him to come to a hopeful outlook on his problems like Conyer Blessing, instead of becoming a "beast toward the Lord" with the negative and bitter attitude of Malcolm Plainer? It happened when Asaph began to *worship the Lord*.

How does worshiping God change our perspective, and set us free from that negative and resentful attitude that sometimes grips us? There could be several reasons why this happens. First, when we focus on God in praise and worship we take the focus off ourselves. As long as we, and our needs and concerns, are the focus we may never come to the healing he has for us. Even talking about *our faith* can divert us from understanding *God's power and glory*. Sometimes we just need to *praise God* and forget about what we want him to do *for us*.

But there's another reason worship sets us free from negativity and resentment. When we worship God we enter another realm, another world. The worlds we live in are built up by the stories we tell. Malcolm Plainer—and Asaph, before he "saw the light"—lived in a hostile, depressing world because they told themselves, and anyone who would listen, a story of how unfairly they had been treated. Conyer Blessing—and Asaph, finally—told a different story of God's goodness and faithfulness. So they lived in a different world where those things were the realities of their life.

Recently I read a book Shirley had in her library called *Parallel Universes*, by Fred Alan Wolf. It's not a religious book, it's a book of scientific theory based on how the world looks at the subatomic level. Quantum physics, Werner Heisenberg's principle of uncertainty, Einstein's theories of relativity and gravity, and other ideas lead to the theory of parallel universes. Whenever we observe the phenomena of the universe or make a decision about them we enter into a new, parallel universe that, somehow, merges back into all the other infinite number of universes that could exist.

The idea of parallel universes sounds a little goofy, or at least well beyond my comprehension, but it started me thinking. What we do, whenever we enter into worship and prayer, is something like that. We enter into a "parallel universe" where things work differently from how they work in our so-called "normal" or everyday world. Problems we face in the "normal" world—whether they be problems with other people, illnesses, social issues, evil forces at work in the political arena—these problems take on a different aspect when we move into the realm of worship and see the Lord at work, winning his victory over those forces that want to damage and destroy his creation.

Asaph points us toward this truth in another psalm, Psalm 76:

*In Judah God is known, his name is great in Israel.
His [tabernacle is] in Salem, his dwelling place in Zion.
There he broke the flashing arrows, the shield, the sword, and the weapons of war. Selah
... Who can stand before thee when once thy anger is roused?*

*From the heavens thou didst utter judgment; the earth feared and was still,
when God arose to establish judgment to save all the oppressed of the earth. Selah*
(Psalm 76:1-3, 7-9).

Again, notice what Asaph is telling us. Israel had enemies in the “normal” world, hostile nations that were coming against God’s people. But it wasn’t on some piece of land, some patch of dirt, that God first defeated those enemies and rescued his people. No, *His dwelling place [is] in Zion*. There *he broke the flashing arrows, the shield, the sword, and the weapons of war*. It’s in the sanctuary, the place of worship, that God rescues us, heals us, vindicates us, delivers us from our enemies! The battle is fought and won *here*, in this house of worship—in this “parallel universe” that’s created for us when we gather as a church to tell the story of the victory of God. As Psalm 29:9 declares, “in His temple everything says, ‘Glory!’” That’s why worship and praise are so important, and why we need to do our best as a church to make sure that our worship time is a time of celebration, excitement, and release in free-flowing expression of how great God is.

There’s a story about the prophet Elisha and his servant in the Book of Kings that illustrates this very well.

When the servant of the man of God rose early in the morning and went out, behold, an army with horses and chariots was round about the city. And the servant said, “Alas, my master! What shall we do?” He said, “Fear not, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them.” Then Elisha prayed, and said, “O LORD, I pray thee, open his eyes that he may see.” So the LORD opened the eyes of the young man, and he saw; and behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire round about Elisha. (2 Kings 6:15-17).

Through prayer Elisha and his servant were able to enter that “parallel universe” where they could see the victory of the Lord, just as Asaph was able to do when he went into the sanctuary of God.

In the New Testament, the author of Hebrews takes us into the “parallel universe” of worship. “For you have not come to what may be touched,” he says—not just to something in your “everyday” world. “But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the first-born who are enrolled in heaven, and to a judge who is God of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant . . .” (Hebrews 12:18, 22-24a). When we give ourselves to the life of praise, and when we gather in our earthly place of worship, we’re entering into that heavenly Jerusalem where Jesus reigns and where the judgments of God are enacted.

As Christians we’re always at worship in some sense, as Paul says, “addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with all your heart, always and for everything giving thanks in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God the Father” (Ephesians 5:19-20). We’re always telling the story that defines our world, the world in which Jesus Christ is—not just some day in the future but right now—“the faithful witness, the first-born of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth” (Revelation 1:5). The Bible says that on the cross Jesus defeated the enemy that would lay discouragement and condemnation upon us — “having canceled the bond which stood against us with its legal demands; this he set aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the principalities and powers and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in him” (Colossians 2:14-15). That’s the story we need to tell in worship, and throughout our Christian walk. For the story you decide to tell about Jesus is going to be the story you tell about your life.

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