



Rev Chris Taylor – 12/02/18 To Know God's Ways

Here in our text we find David reaching out towards God. He is feeling, verse 16, lonely and afflicted. He is praying, verse 17, that God will relieve the troubles that weigh down his heart, and will deliver him (verse 19) from his many foes and their violent hatred. It is a psalm of lament. We can feel David's sense of desperation as he turns to the Lord.

Have you ever felt that way? Felt isolated and deeply troubled? I felt some of that in my first encounter with depression. It was in high school, right around Christmas-time, and without warning the depression slipped in. I was surrounded by people, by family and friends, but I remember this incredible sense of isolation; almost like there was a kind of invisible barrier separating me from the people around me. It was a scary time. I didn't understand where it had come from or how long it was going to last, but I remembering feeling this sense of disconnection between what I was feeling inside and all the warmth and joy and happiness we traditionally associate with Christmas.

Looking back, it was my first clue that there were things in my life that I needed to address. It took the next thirty years, off and on, to identify and work through all that stuff, driven in part by other crises like Columbine that I had to face along the way. It was hard going, and I wouldn't wish it on anyone. At the same time, being on the far side of it now, I wouldn't trade it for anything. I needed help, but with that help there was so much I learned, so many ways in which I grew that never would have happened otherwise.

One of the things I remember most, however, about that first experience so many years ago, was reaching out to God in the midst of it. I instinctively knew that it was there in God that I was going to find some sense of meaning and hope; there that I would discover some glimmer of light that would speak into my darkness. And God did not disappoint me.

That's what David does here in our text. He prays, verses four and five, that he might know God's ways, and be led in God's truths: "for you" he says, "are the God of my salvation." The God revealed in Scripture is a God who saves, a God who delivers us and offers life. Think here of a drowning man, coughing, choking on the water that has begun to fill his lungs. That's what those desperate times can feel like. Then picture God reaching down, taking hold, drawing that drowning man up towards safety, drawing him up towards life.

It is the connection between that strong hand and the knowledge of God's ways that I want you to hear this morning. For David, they are inseparable. God's ways, God's truths are part of how God saves us. Not a way to prove our worth or earn God's favor, but God showing us how to live this life fully and well.

They are like the rules that govern a good golf swing. Keep your left arm straight. Keep your head still. We don't think, "I don't want any rules. I want to be free!" No, if we want to play golf well, then we're grateful. The rules show us how to play at a higher level. So these rules aren't about someone leaning over and threatening us, "you better do these things or I'm going to get you!" They are more like a coach, or a friend, or a mentor whispering in our ear, "Try this, and see if it doesn't help."

In just that way, God's rules, God's guidance is intended to set us free, free to experience life at a higher level; free to find it at its richest and best. "Make me to know your ways, O Lord; teach me your paths..." Why? Because we know something is missing in my life. Because we've come to realize God knows what makes for life, and knows that which will destroy it.

Sin eats away at our soul. It damages the deepest part of who we are. That's why God hates it. Choose sin, and we move away from God. We move away from life itself. Choose sin and we end up missing the very thing we want the most.

In his book, *Soul Keeping*, author and pastor John Ortberg talks about a businessman he knew who devoted his life to making money.

His children always knew that they had less priority than his job. He never said so, of course, but our deepest devotions simply leak out of our bodies by how we spend our time and what makes us smile and what claims our energy. The man built a corporate empire, but his employees all felt used.

He and his wife bought a magnificent home overlooking the ocean in Southern California. He had a stroke, yet no one came to visit him. He sits in a wheelchair now, breathing from an oxygen tank, alone in a mansion cage.

He still obsesses over what he owns and remains incapable of gratitude or generosity.

This [Ortberg concludes] is the ruined soul.

Why ruined? Not because he made money, but because he made money his god. That's sin. That's contrary to God's will, contrary to that which is going to bring us life. Make anything other than God our focus and goal, and our life is going to be out of balance. Our soul, the great organizing force in our lives, is going to dis-integrate and we will find ourselves wondering why our lives feel so empty, and where it was that we lost our way.

Later on, Ortberg shares the story of another person he knew, this one the mother of a close friend of his back in high school. Her name was Betty. She lived to be ninety years old. “She never did anything extraordinary,” he writes, “She just raised four children.

She just held her family together as her husband wrestled with manic-depressive disorder decade after decade, before there was medication, not knowing what she would come home to each day. She lived in the same small house in Rockford, Illinois, her whole life. She never traveled. She never bought an expensive dress or an upscale car.

When she died, the chapel was packed. It was filled with lives that she had touched. It turns out her house on Carolina Avenue... was one of the strange, small unmarked outposts of a great soul.

Two people. One who seemed to have so much, but missed what matters most. The other who had so little and endured so much struggle but found a life that was full and rich and good. The difference between them? It was who and what they worshipped. When we turn to Jesus we discover that contrary to everything this world and our own instincts would tell us, what matter most in this life is not what we achieve, but the kind of persons that we become.

“Make me to know your ways, O Lord; teach me your paths...” There is only one way that leads to green pastures; only one that takes us to those still waters that nurture our souls. Following any path takes a choice on our part. You have to be intentional. You have to work at it. God’s path isn’t any different. So the real question for us this morning is whether you and I are willing to make that choice; whether we will make it and then keep on making it each and every day so that we, too, might know that abun

ⁱ John Ortberg, *Soul Keeping*, (Zondervan, 1014), pp. 44 and 60