

Praise for All Things

Sermon by RICHARD A. BAER, JR.

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Text: Ephesians 5:18-20

PREACHING has a close relationship to theology, and theology is a rather strange discipline, a discipline which is not quite sure whether it ought to feel at home in the modern university or not. In fact, the role of the theologian may be not too dissimilar to that of the court jester in the medieval world and later. The theologian appears to speak foolishness at times, and one never quite knows whether what he says is going to be very useful or not. Yet, to our surprise, what at first appears to be quite useless sometimes turns out to be the most useful of all.

Jesus had a fine sense for the dialectic of the useful and the useless, for that mysterious interweaving of the relevant and the irrelevant. Consider how he perplexed his followers by telling them that the one who tries to save his life will lose it, whereas the one who loses his life for Jesus' sake will find it. Jesus was a master of the "eschatological surprise," the idea that in the end time things may not turn out the way we expected. In fact, he was bold enough to suggest that the tax collectors (who were collaborators with Rome), the sinners, and the prostitutes, might just make it into the Kingdom of God before the righteous. That was an eschatological surprise that was not too popular in his day, and, of course, he paid the consequences.

The theologian, in his apparent foolishness, may risk saying things that in the long run, by God's grace, may even reflect a certain wisdom. I am reminded of that fascinating passage from the book of Proverbs where we read that the personified Wisdom of God was playing and dancing before God when God created the world:

When he established the heavens, I was there. . . . When he marked out the foundations of the earth, then I was beside him, like a little child; And I was daily his delight, dancing before him always, rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the sons of men.

I have often wondered what this passage means. For such a serious business as the creation of the world, it sounds far too frivolous. Should the author really be talking about play and dancing and a little child at such a time?

As I pondered the meaning of this text, I thought of a comment of Robert Frost: "A poem begins in delight and ends in wisdom." The word "poem," of course, comes from the Greek *poein*, that is, to do or to make. But these are the exact terms of the text from Proverbs. God was making a world, creating a poem. There was delight and also wisdom. But what does it all mean?

What I think it means is that God created the world because he wanted to, not out of compulsion or necessity. As the theologians put it, he created the world out of his own good pleasure. And what he created he found good and beautiful and full of delight. That is clearly the judgment of the priestly editor in the first chapter of Genesis.

For us today this would suggest that the basis of our lives is not work and achievement and the necessity of proving or justifying ourselves but rather joy and delight. Contrary to the maxim, "If you're not good for something, you're good for nothing," the Bible is trying to tell us that just the fact that we are is good. Being is valuable in itself. Life begins with the freeing declaration, "Behold, it is very good!"

Roman Catholic novelist and literary critic Romano Guardini knew the meaning of this declaration when he wrote that worship, analyzed according to its form, is far sooner a kind of play than it is work. It is the most non-utilitarian of all human activities. "It is in the highest sense the life of a child in which everything is picture, melody, and song. It is a pouring forth of the sacred, God-given life of the soul; it is a kind of holy play in which the soul, with utter abandon learns how to waste time for the sake of God." What a marvelous definition of worship, one quite foreign to our contemporary fascination with efficiency and success. I might ask, parenthetically, how many of us even know how to waste time for each other's sake? How simply to be with another person because we delight in and enjoy each other and want to while away some time together? This, says Guardini, is what worship is. It is simply wanting to be in the presence of God.

About five years ago, a book came across my desk that had another idea in it that at first sounded equally foolish to me. In fact when I first saw the main thesis of the author, I thought it was almost indecent. He claimed that we ought somehow to be able to learn to praise God not just for the good things in life, not just for what is beautiful, what is noble, what is pleasing to us, but that we also could learn to praise God for the ugly things in life, for the pain and suffering, for the disappointments and difficulties, indeed for the evil that we see in our own existence. This was a very strange, indeed, a foolish idea to me when I first encountered it. The book, *Prison to Praise*, was written by Merlin Carothers, a former army chaplain. This, I might say, did not predispose me in favor of the book, for my pacifist background left me with more than a little bias against the military. Furthermore, Carothers had few of the academic credentials which at that point in my life were still so important. Nor was the book very well written. The style was clumsy, and at points the author appeared to contradict himself. The book simply did not meet the standards I had learned to expect from religious and theological writing.

Yet, for some reason I do not yet fully understand (call it God's providential grace, if you will), I did not stop reading Carothers' book. I read through the first six chapters, and then when I got to the seventh and eighth chapters, something strange and mysterious began to happen to me. I was no longer aware of the author's poor credentials. I forgot all about his bad grammar. I stopped being offended by his lack of theological sophistication. I

began to listen. There was a deep quiet inside of me. I began to learn.

In the book Carothers tells of an army wife who came to him as chaplain of the base and began to pour out her troubles to him. Her alcoholic husband's drinking problem had grown progressively worse over several years. The woman or her children often found him passed out on the living room floor drunk and naked—or, worse, the neighbors in their apartment building found him that way in the hall. Desperate, the woman saw no alternative but to take the children and leave him. "Whatever you say," she concluded, "don't tell me to stay with him. I just can't do it."

In that last comment—"Don't tell me to stay with him"—Chaplain Carothers somehow heard a note of indecision and a plea. He sensed that she still loved her husband a great deal. At that moment, Carothers writes, he felt led to tell her: "I don't really care whether you stay with him or not. I just want you to thank God that your husband is like he is." The woman was incredulous. How, after all, can a wife thank God that her husband has ruined the family and destroyed their marriage! Finally, however, she agreed to kneel while Chaplain Carothers prayed that God grant her faith enough to believe that "He is a God of love and power who holds the universe in His hand." And she prayed, "I do believe."

When Chaplain Carothers finally called her after two weeks and asked how things were going, she was ecstatic. Her husband hadn't had a drink since the day she had prayed in Carothers' office. "That's wonderful," said Carothers, adding that he wanted to talk to the man about the power of God that was working in their lives. Puz-

zled, the woman said, "Didn't you tell him already?" She was sure that the change in her husband was because the Chaplain had talked to him, prayed with him, and helped him to overcome his drinking problem. "No," replied Carothers, "I haven't met him yet." It was a miracle, said the woman. Yes, replied Carothers, it was the power of praise releasing God's power to work in the man's life.

Perhaps one could offer a reasonably good psychological explanation of what happened in this case. On that particular evening, her husband might have sensed, quite unconsciously even, that something was different. Perhaps for the first time in years, he felt his wife really accepted him as he was. This might have broken (therapists sometimes use the term "decathect") his need to drink—perhaps the need to be the "naughty little boy," or to test his wife's love because as a child he had never really been sure of his parents' love. Something had changed, and he was healed.

An example from my own experience, which also is at least partially intelligible in psychological terms, happened two years ago in a small prayer-encounter group I was involved in. During the second meeting of the group a woman in her mid-thirties broke down crying. "All my life," she said, "I have wanted to have children of my own, and now I know that will never be possible." She had adopted four children, yet she found herself quite unable to accept her situation. She was filled with bitterness, resentment, disappointment.

After a few moments of silence, I felt led to ask her: "Have you tried thanking God for the fact that you are not able to have children of your own?"

But, like Carothers' army wife, she was horrified at the suggestion. Still, something must have reached her, for she was strangely silent the rest of the hour. I decided to let the matter rest.

About half way through our meeting the next day, with almost no introduction, the woman simply said, "I want to try praising God in the way you suggested." "Thank you, God," she prayed, "that I will never be able to have any children of my own." The healing we then witnessed was far more dramatic and sudden than we could have anticipated. As if a stopper had been pulled out of a bottle, fifteen years of resentment, bitterness, and disappointment came flooding out of the woman. She is a different person today than when I first met her.

It is important to note that Chaplain Carothers qualifies in several ways what he says about praising God for pain and suffering. First of all, he points out that we in no way need to deny the reality of suffering and evil. He does not believe that these are just in our imagination, and I agree with him. Such a position would be dangerous both psychologically and theologically. Secondly, Carothers says, praising God for all things does not make it necessary to believe that God willed or sent the evil to us. One must clearly distinguish between the permissive and the directive will of God. He may *permit* certain suffering and difficulties in our lives but not necessarily *send* or *will* them. Thirdly, in no way need we pretend to *like* what has happened to us in situations of suffering, loss, and pain. To do so could well be a kind of psychological suicide. Finally, praising God for all things is not just a pious gimmick. God cannot be manipulated through praise to change his mind and

heal us. He is not at our beck and call to perform religious tricks for us. The sooner we realize that he is no celestial bellhop the quicker we will grow towards spiritual maturity.

In the four years since first reading Carothers' book, I have tried to apply his teachings in my own life. The results have surprised me. There have been areas in my life where there was bitterness, where there was hostility and resentment. There were areas where I had not been able to accept myself, no matter how hard I had tried, nor could I accept others fully. But when I stopped trying to do these things and simply started thanking God for myself just as I was and for others just as they were, some very beautiful things began to happen.

These experiences led me to begin to explore the subject of praising God for all things in a more systematic and scholarly fashion. Could I find such an emphasis, for instance, in the Bible or in the theological literature and devotional writings of the church?

I must admit that the direct Biblical evidence that can be cited in support of the notion of praising God for all things is scanty. Paul writes in Ephesians 5:18-20, "Be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, . . . always and for everything giving thanks in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God the Father." I Thessalonians 5:18 can be translated as in the R.S.V., "Give thanks in all circumstances," but the K.J.V. is probably a better rendering of the original Greek with its, "In everything give thanks." Paul thanks God for his weakness, including his puzzling "thorn in the flesh" (II Cor. 12:1-10), for he believes that even his weakness will work to the greater glory of God.

Finally, we might note Romans 8:28, which, at least, might help establish a theological framework for the theme of praise for all things. I think it is best translated: "We know that God works everything for good with those who love him, with those who are called according to his purpose."

The theme is more clearly present in Christian devotional and theological writings. In his second book, *Power in Praise*, Carothers cites a number of examples. Eighteenth century English clergyman William Law, for instance, said: "If anyone could tell you the shortest, surest way to all happiness and perfection, he must tell you to make it a rule to yourself to thank and praise God for everything that happens to you. For it is certain that whatever seeming calamity happens to you, if you thank and praise God for it, you turn it into a blessing." Helen Keller writes, "I thank God for my handicaps, for through them I have found myself, my work and my God." John Wesley in his *Notes on the New Testament* writes: "Thanksgiving is inseparable from true prayer: it is almost essentially connected with it. He that always prays is ever giving praise, whether in ease or pain, both for prosperity and for the greatest adversity. He blesses God for all things, looks on them as coming from him, and receives them only for his sake; not choosing nor refusing, liking nor disliking anything, but only as it is agreeable or disagreeable to his perfect will."

The theme of praise for all things runs through poetry, philosophy, and literature, as well. The heroine in Leon Bloy's late nineteenth century novel *The Woman Who Was Poor*, utters these amazing words, "Everything that happens, is something to be adored." Her words were not the shallow utter-

ance of someone who had led an easy and sheltered life, for she had suffered greatly and known the loss of almost everyone and everything near and dear to her. Out of context, her words would have sounded obscene to me, but I reserved judgment.

Then came another surprise: Nietzsche, of all people, in his *Will to Power*, wrote: "If it be granted that we say Yea to a single moment, then in so doing we have said Yea not only to ourselves, but to all existence." In his *Posthumous Notes*, he speaks even more directly: "To have joy in anything, one must approve everything."

I also discovered some beautiful passages in the poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke, as in these haunting lines from the tenth of his *Duino Elegies*:

Someday, emerging at last from this terrifying vision, may I burst into jubilant praise to assenting Angels! May not even one of the clear-struck keys of the heart fail to respond through alighting on slack or doubtful or rending strings! May a new-found splendour appear in my streaming face! May inconspicuous Weeping flower! How dear you will be to me then, you Nights of Affliction! Oh, why did I not, inconsolable sisters, more bendingly kneel to receive you, more loosely surrender myself to your loosened hair? We wasters of sorrows! How we stare away into sad endurance beyond them, trying to foresee their end! Whereas they are nothing else than our winter foliage, our sombre evergreen, one of the seasons of our interior year,—not only season—they're also place, settlement, camp, soil, dwelling.

So there I was, a theologian by training, caught up in a theme that made

little sense to me analytically but a great deal of sense existentially, personally. Moreover, I now had found that it was not an uncommon idea in religious and secular literature. So, I began to ask myself: What does it really mean? What are the objections to integrating these ideas into my total experience?

It might be objected that praising God for all things in effect is a refusal to live with the New Testament tension between the cross and resurrection. Would not such a position cheapen grace, docetize the God-forsakenness of the cross, de-eschatologize hope? Does it not trivialize human suffering by too quickly letting it be swallowed up in a theology of glory? Am I not advocating a religion of sight rather than faith, confidence without struggle, conviction without paradox? Do I not forget that the book of Job is also a part of the Scriptures and that Christian mystics refer to the dark night of the soul as well as to praise and thanksgiving? These are all fair objections and cannot be avoided.

Actually, I see much danger in praising God for all things if one does not also deal realistically with the anger and resentment one experiences. On a psychological level, there is an inner process one may have to go through by which an initial rejection of some event or an initial failure to see its point is worked through to a final acceptance and affirmation. If the cross—in one sense a tragedy and an ugly thing—is the very "font of every blessing," then the most unpromising aspects of a person's past can likewise be channels of blessings. But the individual may need to wrestle with the event after the fashion of Job or of Jesus in Gethsemane. Or if a person is not yet ready to cope with the conditions under which a

given part of his life will bless him, he may have to leave it and go into exile, like Jacob. There he may prosper and grow to the point where he is ready to return. Even then, he may have to wrestle with this part of the past, and, in effect, say with Jacob, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me (Gen. 32:26)." Blessing could be seen as the total energy at all levels which comes to one as he accepts larger and larger wholes of self, world, and God into himself.

Praise, as I have presented it, would appear to short-cut this psychological process of wrestling through a problem, and perhaps in a certain sense it does. It could be viewed as an act of sheer faith, an "as if" procedure which makes it possible to apprehend what is not present tangibly. The danger would be that it could lead one into a fantasy world, violating the dynamics by which actual transformation occurs. On the other hand, there is much evidence that in the realm of spiritual growth and healing, ordinary time determinants may not be quite relevant. Lasting change may come without the "ordinary" wrestling and working through of the particular difficulty. A more honest approach might even dare admit that what actually happens even in the more usual psychological "working through" of a problem remains largely a mystery even to the trained therapist. In successful therapy moments of critical change often possess a quality of timelessness about them, not unlike what Mircea Eliade and others mean when they refer to "eternal time." There may be long days of preparation, but the actual "new birth," the emergence of a new Gestalt, may come suddenly, dramatically.

Working through difficult experi-

ences from one's past life may also involve what some writers refer to as "the New Testament teaching on unilateral forgiveness," namely that God calls the Christian to forgive those who harm him even if they neither ask for nor deserve forgiveness (the essential transaction in such a case is between the wronged individual and God). Or it may demand dealing with anger (especially intense, disproportionate anger) in the presence of God before expressing it (if at all) to the person who has committed the offense. The important thing is that anger be dealt with and not repressed, yet dealt with in such a way as not to create further alienation with the offending party.

Finally, praising God for all things—as I have already noted—does not grant one immunity from suffering and pain. Rather it is a placing of the outcome of one's life in God's hands, a refusal to demand that God justify himself to man, a willingness to live through the suffering and pain without accusing God. One can feel God-forsaken and still praise God!

Yet another objection might be raised against a theology of praise. An individual may well find the faith to praise God for everything, the good and evil, in his life, but does not this somehow imply a signal lack of seriousness in dealing with evil? Is not this teaching on praising God for all things at odds with the pervasive Biblical emphasis on justice? Will it not cause us to lose interest in our commitment to improve society, to eliminate suffering and injustice? Perhaps this kind of teaching is more compatible with Taoism or Zen Buddhism than with Judaism and Christianity. The statements "Everything that happens is something to be adored," or "To have joy in anything, one must

approve everything" are, from one perspective, utterly scandalous. They cut right across the whole biblical emphasis on justice and on taking seriously the needs of the poor, the homeless, the orphan and widow.

From another perspective, however, I have come to believe that they express a profound understanding of life, one which Taoists and Zen Buddhists appreciate more easily than Christians and Jews. There is a dimension of human existence where God calls us to stop judging, to go beyond simple assessments of good and evil, beyond our need to label, to criticize, to compare. To be sure, evil still exists, although it is not real in the same sense that God is real, but somehow we must learn that in the mystery of God's righteousness, even darkness and suffering have their place in the total drama of the world coming to birth. In learning the lesson of praise for all things, I believe we will become less self-righteous, less attracted to that kind of absolutist piety that is willing to crush others in the process of saving the world. Our crusading mentality will be tempered by the realization that ultimately the battle is not ours, but God's. We will be more willing to let our agenda be set by God's caring for the world, rather than by the evil and threatening circumstances that we see all about us. Our eyes will be on Him and His saving presence in the world—on the cross, the resurrection, and the second coming of Christ, rather than on the empires of this world, which are, in principle, already defeated, and even in their power and arrogance, already perishing.

The answer to the world's suffering is not for us consciously to take this suffering into ourselves. There may be more than a little hubris in our think-

ing that we could do this in any case. The Bible has a lot to say about vicarious suffering, and there are times when God indeed calls us to suffer for others. But this is not a self-appointed suffering. It is not something which we in our own self-righteousness *choose* to do for someone else. It is not something we look for. We share in the sufferings of Christ. We do not seek them out ourselves.

The kind of praise, I am talking about, then, is no Pollyanna optimism. It is no stoic denial of the suffering of the world. It need not pretend that Dachau and Auschwitz or the napalming of Vietnamese children never happened. In fact, most of the people I know who have broken through to genuine and lasting praise in their lives are people who have suffered deeply, people who have known evil, encountered it directly and brutally, and yet somehow have gone beyond the impact of that evil to quiet acceptance. The reason Christians and the Jews can speak so freely about praise without becoming callous and indifferent to the sufferings of the world, is that they know through their own traditions, through the image of the suffering servant in Judaism and through the reality of the crucifixion in Christianity, what suffering means.

Thus we do not have to become indifferent to the cries of little children and to the pangs of nature brutalized because of man's greed and indifference. We need not ignore the cries of third world mothers who watch their children's bodies and minds twisted by hunger and malnutrition, for biblical religion well knows the meaning of suffering. Christianity is rooted in the cross, as well as in the resurrection.

I have come to believe that God is

precisely the one who always remembers the good and transforms the evil in our lives. Whenever there is beauty, truth, nobility, strength, courage, hope, love, kindness, freedom, God remembers these and somehow writes them into the very fabric of the universe. But the evil he "forgets." The metaphor is clumsy, but we might say that God is "the great cosmic garbage disposal," or, if you want an ecologically better metaphor, "the great compost pile of the universe."

Now, what do I mean? What I think the New Testament writers are trying to say through the doctrine of the cross, is that God in Christ always takes the suffering, the pain, the sin, the loneliness, and the hurt of human existence back into himself and through what one writer has called "the alchemy of grace," transforms these—if we will let him—into the possibility of new life, into the seedbed of the future. The suffering and the pain and the disappointment become the fertilizer, the manure for the future. Out of the debris and ashes of human sin and suffering, God makes it possible for life to blossom again. He is the great cosmic garbage disposal, the great compost pile of the universe, and if we will give him back our sin and our suffering—indeed if we can even learn to praise Him for permitting these things in our lives—I believe we will see miracles happen.

But can we really believe in a God who uses broken bodies and broken minds, the cries of innocent children, lamenting mothers, and bereaved fathers simply as the seedbed of the future? No, I think not, and that is not really what I am suggesting. At least I could not believe in that kind of God. What I am trying to say is this: God is able to use the very things that seem

counter to His purpose, the very things which He hates with a perfect hatred—he is able to use even *these* things to bring about goodness and beauty. If we will give our suffering and pain back to God in praise, he is somehow able to use them to bring about new life.

It is at this point that we finally come face to face with the Biblical affirmation of resurrection and the life to come. I believe Kant was right—some kind of immortality is a necessity for the moral life. For myself, if I did not believe that the napalmed children, the mongoloid babies, the six million Jews of the holocaust will yet somehow know life in all its fullness, I would find it very hard to praise God.

And so we dare to praise. We even dare to praise God for the pain and suffering of the world. Will it work? In my own life it has made a great difference. But in one sense I do not care whether it works or not, for I believe we are first of all called to faithfulness rather than to effectiveness. And perhaps in the long run, in the mercy of God, the life of faithfulness and the foolishness of commitment to a crucified messiah will turn out to be the only true wisdom. That is the risk of faith. That is the hope of the resurrection.

Thomas Merton, in *New Seeds of Contemplation*, writes this:

What is serious to men is often trivial in the sight of God. What in God might appear to us as "play" is perhaps what he himself takes most seriously. At any rate the Lord plays and diverts Himself in the garden of his creation, and if we could let go of our own obsession with what we think is the meaning of it all, we

might be able to hear His call and follow Him in His mysterious, cosmic dance. We do not have to go very far to catch echoes of that game, and of that dancing. When we are alone on a starlit night; when by chance we see the migrating birds in autumn descending on a grove of junipers to rest and eat; when we see children in a moment when they are really children; when we know love in our own hearts; or when, like the Japanese poet Bashō we hear an old frog land in a quiet pond with a solitary splash—at such times the awakening, the turning inside out of all values, the "newness," the emptiness and purity of vision that make themselves evident, provide a glimpse of the cosmic dance.

For the world and time are the dance of the Lord in emptiness. The silence of the spheres is the music of a wedding feast. The more we persist in misunderstanding the phenomena of life, the more we analyze them out into strange finalities and complex purposes of our own, the more we involve ourselves in sadness, absurdity, and despair. But it does not matter much, because no despair of ours can alter the reality of things, or stain the joy of the cosmic dance which is always there. Indeed, we are in the midst of it, and it is in the midst of us, for it beats in our very blood, whether we want it to or not.

Yet the fact remains that we are invited to forget ourselves on purpose, cast our awful solemnity to the winds and join in the general dance.

And Rainer Maria Rilke writes:

Tell us, poet, what is it you do?—
I praise.

But the deadly and the monstrous things, how can you bear them?
I praise.

But even what is nameless, what is anonymous, how can you call upon it?—
I praise.

What right have you to be true in every disguise, beneath every mask?
I praise.

And how is it that both calm and violent things, like star and storm, know you for their own?—
because I praise.