3. *Unself-Centered*

PSALM 110

The LORD says to my lord:
  "Sit at my right hand,
till I make your enemies your footstool."

The LORD sends forth from Zion
  your mighty scepter.
  Rule in the midst of your foes!
Your people will offer themselves freely
  on the day you lead your host
  upon the holy mountains.
From the womb of the morning
  like dew your youth will come to you.
The LORD has sworn
  and will not change his mind,
"You are a priest for ever
  after the order of Melchizedek."

The Lord is at your right hand;
  he will shatter kings on the day of his wrath.

He will execute judgment among the nations,
filling them with corpses;
he will shatter chiefs
over the wide earth.
He will drink from the brook by the way;
therefore he will lift up his head.

In the Biblical world of thought man is not expected to be centered upon his own personality, but on God. . . . Their interest was in a divine drama, not in a human personality; in supernatural happenings, not in the charm of a gracious Galilean.

DONALD BAILLIE[1]

Things are not going very well these days. As a matter of fact, they never have. It is most odd. We live in the midst of extravagant beauties. The earth beneath us and the heavens above us contain shapes and sounds and colors that take our breath away. We ourselves are a marvel of staggering proportions: there is no end to the exuberance of poems, photographs, stories, landscapes, portraits, concerts, machines, tools, buildings, gardens, bridges, engines, dams, lyrics, sonnets, mosaics, sculpture, pottery, and fabrics that human beings make. The American government has been, many people think, the most successful combination of political freedom and responsibility that the world has yet seen. Given the wildly beautiful and awesome land that is our home, the high intelligence and marvelous sensibility of men and women, and the conspicuous success of our political experiment in democracy, why are things so lousy? Why don't things work better? After all these centuries of lectures and sermons, symphonies and legislation, revolutions and rail-

1. Donald Baillie, *God Was in Christ* (London: Faber & Faber Ltd., 1956), pp. 43–44.

roads, why aren't we all scholars and saints? Thomas Hardy's epitaph is curt and cynical: "After two thousand years of Christian mass/We've got as far as poison gas."[2]

Is there anything to do about it? Most people think that there is. True, there are days when it looks as if the race is between bigotry and apathy, between the people who blame all our ills on a hated enemy and the people who have succumbed to the nothing-can-be-done disease. But in fact an enormous amount of energy is poured out each day to make things better: care for the environment, compassion for the hurt, concern for the poor, diligence in government. Great armies of people are out there teaching, healing, legislating, guiding, comforting, rehabilitating. Evil in both its obvious and subtle forms is being fought.

But the impressive number of people committed to doing something about what is wrong with the world does not always bolster hope. A close observation of the lives of those who are trying to do something about the mess around us and an unsentimental look at the results of their efforts are not always heartening. Why, for instance, do people who do good so often behave so badly? Doing good brings out the worst in some people. Why do they become so bad-tempered, so abrasive, so self-righteous? Why do so many impressively launched crusades run out of gas so quickly? Why do so many vigorous moral causes have such short lives? Why does so much well-intentioned, righteous fervor dribble out into sentimentalism? Plunging into the battle does not always bring the intended results. Sometimes our efforts make things worse. Sometimes they make us worse.

2. Thomas Hardy, *The Complete Poems* (New York: Macmillan, 1982), p. 572.

Recentering Prayer

Christians wake up in the middle of this mess every day and get out of bed to do something about it. What do we do? If we polled our colleagues, as every now and then someone does, we would get a bewildering variety of responses. One of the responses, though, that would be in predictably short supply would be "pray." I don't mean that our polls would show that Christians do not pray but that most do not see prayer as the central and essential action to remedy the mess that we are in. Prayer is understood rather as a private, "in-house" activity. When it does occur in the public sector, it is ceremonial.

This understanding and practice of prayer is so common and accepted among us that it comes as a shock to learn that Christians in other times and places have taken a decidedly different position. The difference is clear in what we know of the Christian community in the first century. That era, in contrast to ours, was regrettably deficient in matters of poll taking and statistical analysis, so we lack the kind of evidence that we are used to having provided for us. But we do have the New Testament and find that the most popular psalm in it is the 110th — quoted seven times and alluded to fifteen times.[3] No other psalm comes close. The community of first-century Christians pondered, discussed, memorized, and meditated on Psalm 110. When they opened their prayer book, the Psalms, the prayer that they were drawn to and that shaped their common life was Psalm 110. What twentieth-century American has so much as heard of Psalm 110?

The informal polls that I have been taking for a number of years show that the American favorite is the 23rd, which

3. A. F. Kirkpatrick, *Commentary on the Psalms* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1947), p. 665.

is not even quoted once in the New Testament. By contrasting our preference with that of the early Christians I do not intend anything invidious. Psalm 23 deserves its popularity. It has brought and continues to bring a true word of God and develops a deep, authentic relationship with God for those who pray it. But Psalm 110 does not deserve its neglect: it is an extremely important psalm, skillfully and vigorously written, and it directs us in prayer that uncenters the self — rescues us from self-centeredness by recentering us in the being and action of God. For those who care about doing something about what is wrong with the world, the consequences of praying this psalm are enormous.

Precision Balancing

The two most important sentences in Psalm 110 are oracles of direct address from God: "The LORD says to my lord: 'Sit at my right hand, till I make your enemies your footstool'" (v. 1) and "The LORD has sworn and will not change his mind, 'You are a priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek'" (v. 4). The two sentences dominate the psalm and divide it into two precisely balanced parts. David Noel Freedman has made the striking observation that each stanza (in Hebrew) has exactly seventy-four syllables — precision balancing![4]

This framework — "the LORD says . . . the LORD has sworn" — in itself accounts for its first-century prominence. The people we know something about via the New Testament were interested above all else in hearing what God had to say to them. Their thirst for what they had come to realize was good news was insatiable. Their appetite for the Word of God was incessant. They were like Ezra Pound in *Homage to Sextus*

4. Quoted by Dahood, *The Psalms*, 3:113.

Propertius: "Tell it to me, tell it to me, all of it, I guzzle with outstretched ears!"[5]

Does this outline — "The LORD says . . . the LORD has sworn" — also account for its twentieth-century neglect? The religious voices that command the largest audiences in our society are those that are publicists for the ego — the religious ego, to be sure, but the ego all the same. The deep-rooted, me-first distortions of our humanity have been institutionalized in our economics and sanctioned by our psychologies. Now we have gotten for ourselves religions in the same style, religions that will augment our human potential and make us feel good about ourselves. We want prayers that will bring us daily benefits in the form of a higher standard of living, with occasional miracles to relieve our boredom. We come to the Bible as consumers, rummaging through texts to find something at a bargain. We come to worship as gourmets of the emotional, thinking that the numinous might provide a nice supplement to sunsets and symphonies. We read "The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want," and our hearts flutter. We read "You will not fear the terror of the night," and we are tranquilized. We read "He does not deal with us according to our sins" and decide we have probably been too hard on ourselves. But when we read "The LORD says . . . the LORD has sworn," our interest flags and we reach for the newspaper to find out how the stock market is doing.

We are probably no worse than the people of the first century in these ways. They did it too. The remarkable thing, though, is that out of the prevailing religious sensuousness and opportunism a group of people actually developed a taste for hearing what God had to say on his own terms, so much

5. Ezra Pound, *Selected Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1957), p. 82.

so that their favorite prayer became one that centered their lives in what God was saying: "the LORD says . . . the LORD has sworn." Praying Psalm 110 brought them to centered attention before the *word* of God and involved their lives in the *work* of God.

Midcourse Adjustments

The centered and centering God of Psalm 110 is emphasized by repetition: "The LORD says . . . the LORD has sworn." The repetition is functional; having caught our attention, it keeps our attention. Nothing is more common in the life of the Spirit than to begin right and to end wrong. We are launched into the way of faith by God's word ("the LORD says"), but then we drift. Midcourse adjustments ("the LORD has sworn") are required to maintain the centering.

The self is persistent. Quietly, subtly, ingeniously, it works itself back to the center. We have professional careers to advance. We have institutional responsibilities to maintain. We have families to feed and lawns to mow. We have causes in which we have invested huge hunks of our identity. At one point we found our center in "the LORD says," but an urgent concern distracted us, or a novel subject engrossed us. We are still, of course, religious, but the religion has gradually become a comforting, steadying background to the center-stage self. We have, unawares, become officious clerks in the house of creation, concerned with the neatness of the bookkeeping but oblivious to the wild and extravagant exchanges of mercy and grace that take place all around as God speaks. We become busybody copy editors to the people around us who are learning to tell the story of God's saving love in their lives: we delete commas, rearrange semicolons, get cranky with the sloppiness of the story that they tell in their breathless but awkward syntax. Then we are ripe for a midcourse recentering after the manner of Psalm 110: "The *LORD* has sworn!"

That without deliberate intent we should let the preoccupations of the self usurp adoration of God is understandable, but it is not inevitable. That our sense of wonder before God's centering Word should leak through the sieve of the everyday is commonplace, but it is not necessary. My friends Larry and Ruth are farmers in Montana. Their farm is in a mountain valley. A few miles away, across the valley, a range of the Rocky Mountains begins its rise and within a few miles lifts skyward to over 7,000 feet. It is a splendid, jagged border to their horizon, colored with shifting shades of blue and green as the sun moves across the sky. I was once standing in the field visiting with them and said, "What a marvelous setting for your work! But I suppose that you are so used to it that you don't even see it anymore." They said, "Oh no, we're caught breathless several times a day. The beauty keeps unfolding; every day we're involved in fresh variations of it." Familiarity does not always breed contempt. But reminders are needed: "The LORD says . . . the LORD has sworn."

Psalm 110 established its eminence in the early Christian community by centering the self in the God who speaks. They knew that they were in a messed-up world and that something had to be done about it. They also knew that their good works and good intentions were flawed in such a way that they only made it worse. And they knew that this did not disqualify them from the work: they had been drawn into what God was doing in Christ to establish his will "on earth as it is in heaven."

How were they to do it? They prayed Psalm 110. It shaped their understanding of who they were and their place in the world by what it declared that world to be: when God speaks, things happen. Genesis 1 had trained them in what

to expect. The word of God is creative: "God said . . . and it was so." In Genesis 1, God's word makes the world; in Psalm 110, God's word makes Messiah, the Christ.

Messianism was in the air in the first century. The place was crawling with saviors, miracle mongers, and assorted messiahs with blueprints for the world's salvation. Everyone was in on it in one way or another. The place was buzzing with excitement. But there was also bewildering confusion. Who was capable of making sense out of it? Who was qualified to sort out the claims and counterclaims? The great foundation stones of biblical revelation from the Hebrew experience were scattered like rubble. Mixed in were gems from Greece and Rome, Persia and Egypt. How was it possible to discern a coherent truth in the chaos? Religion was "without form and void, and darkness was on the face of the deep."

This was the world into which Jesus of Nazareth was born. Poor, powerless, and obscure, he was a most implausible messiah. Then God spoke,

> The LORD says to my lord:
> "Sit at my right hand,
> till I make your enemies your footstool."

A king came into being, one who brings order, beauty, justice, peace. God spoke again,

> The LORD has sworn
> and will not change his mind,
> "You are a priest for ever
> after the order of Melchizedek."

A priest was formed, one who puts persons into a whole relationship with God. God spoke the king-priest Messiah into being, just as he had spoken creation into being. The birth,

ministry, suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth collected and shaped all the scattered materials of truth and revelation into a recognizable, organic, personal event — a stunning act of redemption.

With the two oracles (vv. 1 and 4) as anchors, the psalm elaborates metaphors rather than arguments to show Messiah drawing, without coercion, hopeful armies to his leadership:

> Your people will offer themselves freely
> on the day you lead your host
> upon the holy mountains.
> From the womb of the morning
> like dew your youth will come to you.

A second group of metaphors shows God establishing his rule against all opposition:

> The Lord is at your right hand;
> he will shatter kings on the day of his wrath.
> He will execute judgment among the nations,
> filling them with corpses;
> he will shatter chiefs
> over the wide earth.

The final sentence is unforgettable:

> He will drink from the brook by the way;
> therefore he will lift up his head.

Early Christians saw their Lord Jesus in that figure: the king-priest among us on our level, thirsty in his humanness and kneeling at the brook; then refreshed, with lifted head, proceeding on his way, ruling and saving. The grand and the

homely are integrated, the personal and the political are united in that figure.[6]

This rendition of Messiah was far too unprepossessing for the worldly arrogant. They wanted a messiah who would develop power plays that would set the world back on its heels. They dismissed this one with contempt. The image fared no better with the timidly pious. A thirsty, kneeling messiah was too vulnerable and ordinary for them. They wanted a messiah who would get them out of the limitations and humiliations of their everydayness. But for those who were learning to pray, involving themselves in the action of God after the manner of Jesus, the image was exactly right.

Messiah is put together out of the fragmented functions of ruling and saving, of king and priest. In antiquity (in the person of Melchizedek), the office of king and priest had been a single, organic function. But the functions had gotten separated so that instead of being complementary they were, more often than not, conflicting and competitive rather than coordinated parts of a whole. The king represented God's power to rule, shape, and guide life. The priest represented God's power to renew, forgive, and invigorate life. The one, associated with the palace, operated in the external world of politics. The other, associated with the temple, operated in the internal world of the spirit. The king specialized in horizontal, human relationships. The priest specialized in vertical, spiritual relationships. The one was responsible for giving

6. A similar picture is reconstructed by modern scholars, but in terms of an ancient enthronement ceremony in which the king is led down to the foot of the hill of Jerusalem to the spring of Gihon. He drinks from the waters of Gihon in a kind of sacramental act and is anointed by the priest. Then, with head lifted high, he proceeds back to the temple area with jubilation and rejoicing, accompanied by shouts of "Long live the king!" (1 Kings 1:32–40). Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 60–150* (Eng. trans. Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989), pp. 76f.

structure to life; the other, for giving life to the structure. They were obviously made for each other, but they did not act like it. Then, before the eyes of a few Palestinians, it all came together in the life of Jesus. Psalm 110 describes the coming together in the making of Messiah.

God ruled and saved, and the two acts were the same thing. All the parts of the universe and history fell into place and made sense; all the longings and appetites of the spirit found a terminus. The life without and the life within were demonstrated to be a single life: the life of God in Jesus Christ, Lord and Savior.

Put Together

Then something else happened — if possible, even more wonderful. At the same time that they discovered this putting together and centering of all things in Messiah, they also discovered that they were centered, which is to say, unself-centered. The self, distraught and distracted in attempting to please a hundred gods and avoid a thousand demons, no longer had that impossible task. The self's desperate quest to find answers and acquire knowledge that would establish it in a godlike security was over. The obsessive morality that people hoped would fit their selves for heaven but only made them miserable to live with was done with. All the gnostic systems and moral sweat and pagan superstitions were thrown out: "Sit at my right hand till I make your enemies your footstool" — the rule was accomplished. "You are a priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek" — the redemption was completed. The *world* was put together so that it made sense; they were put together so that they made sense. Psalm 110 shaped the many-dimensioned truths of the Messiah-making Word of God into a prayer that kept the life of

faith attentive and responsive to the comprehensive range of what God was doing in each person and in the entire world. No wonder it was their favorite.

An Immodest Agenda

Amitai Etzioni, an immigrant Israeli sociologist, has set forth with urgent passion what he calls "an immodest agenda" in an effort to do something about the precipitous decline of civilization in America. He has abandoned the cool objectivity of his academic discipline and is making a fervent appeal to Americans for a commitment to our common good as a society and a nation. He is convinced that such a commitment must come not from a new social plan or legislative program but from widespread unself-centering. He writes, "It is my thesis that millions of individual Americans, the pillars of a free society and a vigorous economy, have been cut off from one another and have lost their effectiveness. . . . The need to rebuild the economy, national security and the community calls for a social philosophy and an individual orientation that are much less ego-centered."[7] He argues that America must be reconstructed from the ground up by leadership that demonstrates that the self-centered "me-ism" and other pop psychologies of the past decade will not work over the long, American haul.

It is an immodest agenda. But not nearly as immodest as the one Christ set for his followers, who acquired a reputation for turning the world upside down. They discovered very early that only prayer was both personal enough to get them unself-centered and comprehensive enough to include all aspects of the fallen world in the personal/political action

7. Amitai Etzioni, *An Immodest Agenda* (New York: New Press, 1983).

of Messiah. The frequency with which they prayed Psalm 110 is evidence of their discovery. Unlike our secular prophets and moralists, they did far more than analyze and urge — they had a workable strategy that they faithfully put into action in their praying. There has not been a day since, when Christians (sometimes few, sometimes many) have not been praying Psalm 110 and prayers like it. Recruits keep getting drawn into the ranks.

God has made it clear that he is not content to rescue a few souls from damnation. Redemption has been conceived on a scale far exceeding our capacity to comprehend it — a new heaven and a new earth are involved. People who pray find themselves involved both with the king who is establishing his rule in the cosmos and the priest who is setting persons right, before God. In prayer we participate from the center to the periphery of God's oscillating personal/political action.