

Where Are the Nine?

Luke 17:11-19

With Jesus on the Road to Jerusalem

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"Where are the nine?" Well, they're doing what Jesus told them to do: checking in with the Israeli counterpart to the DC Health Department. When Jesus told the ten, "Go, and show yourselves to the priests," he was routing them through proper channels. In the absence of doctors, priests tested recovering lepers to insure that they would be no threat to their neighbors. And that's where the nine were, on their way to be examined so they could return to their families and renew their careers. Once they were certified by the priests they would no longer be outcasts, scrounging for food in garbage pits. They would no longer have to shout "Unclean, unclean," whenever someone got within fifty feet. They would no longer be abused by passersby who viewed leprosy as God's judgment on the worst of sinners. So before they woke up to find it was only a dream, they were rushing to get certificates of health, no doubt thinking to themselves, "I'll send Jesus a thank you note sometime next week."

Where are the nine? Preserving their health and insuring their future. And there is nothing wrong with that, nothing at all, unless we forget the One who gives us our health and who alone can insure our future. The nine forgot, the tenth did not: "Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him." And Jesus, at the end of the story, adds this intriguing comment, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well." But weren't they all made well? No, the others were "made clean," according to verse 14, but this man, by praising God and thanking Jesus, achieved a state of wellness not shared by the other nine. The nine got rid of their leprosy. The tenth found an inner health that would keep him safe and sound even if the leprosy returned.

We've all known people who were healthy in spirit even when they were desperately sick in body. How do they do it? Where do they get the strength to endure such pain, and to do it with a sweet spirit? That kind of wellness comes, in part, from choosing to praise God in all things. Note that I said "choosing" to praise God. That's because praise in times of pain is not easy. It doesn't come naturally. But then praise doesn't come naturally in times of pleasure either. When life is easy we tend to take it for granted, or to assume that we deserve it, so we forget and fail to praise God, the giver of every good and perfect gift.

But those who choose to praise God in times of pain discover that praise diverts their attention away from life's problems so they can focus on God's promises and God's presence. The more I concentrate on my problems, the more I will be mastered by my problems. They will be at the center and the circumference of my vision. They will surround me with their nameless fears and lay siege with their menacing threats. But when I sing hymns in the shower, I put myself in the presence of One who is greater than my problems. When I breathe a word of thanks before going into a difficult meeting, I connect with the God who promises, "Fear not, for I am with you, be not afraid, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my victorious right hand." (Isaiah 41:10)

For reasons we cannot always understand, God does not rescue us from every deadly peril. Yet God will go with us through every peril, and it is praise that reconnects us with the God who is not only "out there" somewhere, but "right here," working in us, watching over us, and walking alongside us.

Pain is like a close-up lens on your camera. Pain narrows our vision until misery is all we can see. Praise is like a wide-angle lens. Praise drinks in the blue sky and delights in the scarlet sunsets. Praise remembers good times and savors past blessings. Praise reads a Psalm and says, "That God is my God too." Praise looks at the cross and remembers what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. With the wide-angle lens of praise we can see not only our present distress but also God's future liberation from all that distresses us. Focused on God, we may walk with poise this earthly way, whatever life may bring and whenever death may come.

I am thinking of two authors, both of whom met overwhelming obstacles with rare courage, yet emerged from their experiences looking through different lenses. One was Albert Camus, a witness to Nazi atrocities in France, a member of the French resistance, a man who was intimately aware of suffering. In his novel "The Plague," Dr. Rieux battles the bubonic plague in the North African city of Oran. He works day and night, he spends himself selflessly, he watches close friends die, and he emerges at the end bone-weary but undefeated. Yet when the plague recedes he experiences no euphoria. For he knows that the bacillus has simply gone underground and will one day emerge once again to lay its deadly grip on the defenseless city. For Camus the plague is a metaphor for all the evil in the world, race hatred, concentration camps, the extermination of six million Jews, the deaths of hundreds of thousands of men and women on both sides of the Second World War. And even though the Allies defeated Hitler, nevertheless the war bacillus has simply gone underground, and will one day emerge to lay its deadly grip on defenseless millions. The Allies may have won the battle, but they will lose the war. Camus is courageous but not hopeful.

The other author wrote the hymn we will sing in just a moment. Martin Rinkert wrote "Now Thank We All Our God" after years of war, famine, and pestilence, after burying so many people that, by all normal odds, he himself should have fallen victim, if not to the plague, then to the hopelessness of Camus. But he chose to look at the world through the wide-angle lens of praise. And his words come down from the 17th century to remind us that we too may lose some of our battles but God has already won the war, and we are on the winning side.

So we praise, and we pray with Martin Rinkert: O may this bounteous God through all our life be near us. With ever-joyful hearts and blessed peace to cheer us. And keep us in His grace, and guide us when perplexed, And free us from all ills, in this world and the next.