

The Ride of Your Life: Why Knowing God is so Vital to Your Voyage (Ps. 128, 131)

Chris Altrock – May 9, 2010

Jonathan Hill is the author of a book entitled What Has Christianity Ever Done For Us?¹ Some of you may be asking that question this morning. Maybe you're here at Highland because a friend invited you since we just opened this facility or because a family member invited you since it's Mother's Day. You may not regularly attend church. And as someone not wholly committed to Christianity, you may wonder, "What has Christianity ever done for us?"

Christianity, of course, is blamed for all sorts of things: intolerance, the Crusades, the Inquisition, and slavery, to name a few. Jonathan Hill, however, shows that rather than being a plague on humanity, Christians have made a positive impact on human life.

- For example, Hill notes that the fall of Rome left most of Western Europe without secure political or social structures. That instability resulted in a life for the average person that was "*poor, nasty, brutish, and short.*" In other words, life after Rome's fall was awful. But Hill shows that the only group that stepped into the gap to try to improve people's lives and provide relief was the church. Socially, the church was the only stable institution in the lives of many at that time.
- Hill also describes the positive role which the Popes played in ancient Rome. For example, when Attila the Hun invaded Italy in the fifth century, only Pope Leo I rode out to persuade him not to sack Rome. By the time of Gregory the Great in the late sixth century, the Pope was responsible not only for the spiritual welfare of people in the city of Rome, but also for feeding, policing, and protecting them, too. That wasn't because the Popes had seized power. Instead, they and the church were the only ones capable of caring for the daily needs of Rome's people. Over all, Hill argues that Christianity has had a tremendously positive impact around the world.

"What has Christianity ever done for us?" "What good comes from following God?" As the Jews travelled to and from Jerusalem three times each year to religious festivals, at least two of the songs they regularly sang asked and answered this question. Here they were, headed to a religious festival where they would visit the temple of God and worship God. The journey there was a good time to ask "Why?" "What has Judaism ever done for us?" "What good comes from following God?"

One of the traveling songs which asked and answered this question was Ps. 128: *1 Blessed is everyone who fears the LORD, who walks in his ways! 2You shall eat the fruit of the labor of your hands; you shall be blessed, and it shall be well with you. 3Your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house; your children will be like olive shoots around your table. 4Behold, thus shall the man be blessed who fears the LORD. 5 The LORD bless you from Zion! May you see the prosperity of Jerusalem all the days of your life! 6May you see your children's children! Peace be upon Israel!* (Ps. 128:1-6 ESV).

In verse 1 the song describes someone who *fears the LORD*... and *walks in his ways*. This song is describing a person who is *inwardly* is devoted to God---*fears the LORD*, and is also *outwardly*

living according to God's ways---walks in his ways. The song is not describing a person who just warms a seat in a worship service each Sunday and lives Monday-Saturday his own way. The song is not describing a person who dabbles in spirituality. If that describes you, this song is not for you. There's really not much good that comes from following God for people who just play at it. This song is about the good that following God brings to the few who are willing to fear God and walk in his ways—those willing to be inwardly devoted to God *and* outwardly living a godly life. And the question is: What has knowing and following God ever done for that kind of person?

The singer answers this question in three ways:

- *First, the singer states that knowing and following God brings blessing to career: 2You shall eat the fruit of the labor of your hands; you shall be blessed, and it shall be well with you.* The song is saying that your career, the time you spend at the office, or in the classroom, or on the work site will be better when you fear the LORD and walk in his ways.
- *Second, the singer states that knowing and following God brings blessing to kin: 3Your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house; your children will be like olive shoots around your table.* The song states that kinship--home life--will be more meaningful and peaceful when you know God and follow God. Married life and parenting life will improve when you fear God and walk in his ways.
- *Third, the singer states that knowing and following God brings blessing to community: 5The LORD bless you from Zion! May you see the prosperity of Jerusalem all the days of your life! 6May you see your children's children! Peace be upon Israel!* Old Testament scholar Derek Kidner suggests that in these final verses, the singer is demonstrating that fearing God and walking in God's ways ultimately bless or improve the entire community.² The song is saying that the city of Jerusalem and the nation of Israel—the larger community—will experience blessing, prosperity, and peace as people fear God and walk in his ways.

When people know and follow God, career improves, kin improves, and even the larger community improves.

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- This song leads me to think of Jim and Mildred Kennon. These longtime Highland members recently celebrated 67 years of marriage. I think they could testify this morning of the blessing that knowing and following God has brought to their kinship—to their married life.
- This song leads me to think of David and Brenda Hill and Donnie and Suzanne Pike. After last Sunday's worship, my family and I went to a barbeque place down the road with the Hills and the Pikes. The Hill's adopted three girls and a boy several years ago. The Pikes have four girls and two sons. Between them, they have ten children. I think they could testify this morning of the blessing that knowing and following God has brought to their kinship—to their parenting life.
- This song leads me to think of Kevin Chadwell, a Highland member and partner at a large accounting firm. I think he could testify this morning that his faith in God has helped him deal with the enormous pressures and laborious pace of his career.
- And this song leads me to consider Christian ministries in Memphis like Families in Transition (FIT). FIT provides care to homeless and pregnant women. It's not hard to see

how our larger community is a better community because of the way the people at FIT fear God and walk in his ways.

This song shows that following God and knowing God benefits life before death, not just after death. But too often we end the discussion right here. For many of us, God is the means to the end of a better career, a better kinship, or a better community. But God is only a means to those ends. For some of us, we really only follow God and know God because we want that better career, kin, or community. But there is a deeper reason to follow God and know God. And Ps. 131 explains it: *1 O LORD, my heart is not lifted up; my eyes are not raised too high; I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous for me. 2 But I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother; like a weaned child is my soul within me. 3 O Israel, hope in the LORD from this time forth and forevermore.* (Ps. 131:1-3 ESV).

The image in verse 2 is central to understanding this song. The image is of a young child resting contentedly in his mother's arms. The song tells us this is a "weaned child." There was a time when this child desperately sought one thing from his mother: milk. He would cry for it. Every three hours he was begging for it. Without it, he was fretful and anxious and discontent. At that stage in his maturity, Mom was primarily a means to that one end. Mother mattered primarily because she was the source of milk. But now something has happened. This child no longer desperately seeks milk. This child is no longer begging for milk. This child has been weaned. Now, all this child wants is Mom. Mother is no longer the means to an end. Mother is the end. The child rests contentedly simply because he is in the presence of Mother.

The singer suggests that there was a time in his life when he was like the young child prior to being weaned. There was a time when his *heart was lifted up*; when his *eyes were raised too high*; when he did *occupy himself with things too great and too marvelous*. At that stage in his maturity, this singer had big plans. He had big agendas. He would not be satisfied until he had achieved everything on his ambitious to-do list. We can guess that, as a religious person, he was turning to God as the means to those ends. The reason he feared God and walked in God's ways was that he wanted God to help him achieve his lofty, great, and marvelous dreams. All that mattered to him was turning those dreams into reality.

But like a weaned child who's given up that milk, this singer has given up his dreams.³ He no longer frets away after these ambitions. God is no longer the means to those ends. Now, God is the end. All the singer wants now is simply God. And he urges others to also find their hope in simply being with God: *O Israel, hope in the LORD from this time forth and forevermore*. The traveler is urging all of us to find the hope in God that he's found. He's urging all of us to find contentment simply in God. Not in God as a means to our ends. But in God as the end.

Taken together with our previous song, this song says that knowing and following God not only brings blessing to career, kin, and community. *But it also brings blessing to the core of our being*. This song implies that even if career is taken from us, death or disease or divorce hits our kin, and injustice and poverty hammer at our community, it is still possible to find hope and contentment in our very core, because God himself is enough. Simply having relationship with

God is the greatest blessing of fearing God and walking in his ways. What good comes from knowing and following God? This song says the greatest good is God himself.

These two songs mean a great deal in light of our upcoming Special Contribution for World and Urban Missions. Twice a year we collect money for world and urban missions. Our Spring contribution is on May 23. For those of you visiting, the word “contribution” may make you wince. “I knew it,” you may be thinking, “this church opens up and on just their second Sunday they start talking about money.” I’m sympathetic with that reaction. But hear me out. I think you may actually like what I’m talking about.

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There are 8 urban ministries/ministries to those in need which Highland supports through this Special Contribution: 1) Memphis Urban Ministry, which ministers comprehensively to the poor of Memphis; 2) Raleigh Community Church of Christ, an urban church plant which leads individuals and families to faith in God; 3) The counseling center at Agape which provides assistance to children and families in the city; 4) Families in Transition, a ministry in Memphis to homeless and pregnant women; 5) HopeWorks, a ministry providing job skills to the unemployed in Memphis; 6) Lifeline, a ministry that provides assistance to people in need who contact Highland directly; 7) Home, a ministry providing assistance to Highland members with financial difficulties; and 8) the Christian Student Center, a ministry to students at the University of Memphis.

In addition, there are 6 world missions supported through this Special Contribution: 1) the Melanesian Bible College and its Medical Clinic, run by Jab Mesa, which trains preachers and plants churches in Papua New Guinea; 2) missionaries Nathan and Karen Luther who work at the Shiloh Christian School and with a local church in Bacolod, Philippines; 3) the Ministry of Theological Education, which equips leaders in churches around the world; 4) missionaries Joe and Betty Canon who minister in Ukraine; 5) The Bila Tserkva Church of Christ in Bila Tserkva, Ukraine and its preacher Kostya, and 6) The Ukrainian Education Center, a ministry to students in Kiev, Ukraine. On May 23 we hope to give these ministries \$133,000.

Why do we support these ministries? It’s because we know the truth of Ps. 128 and Ps. 131. There are people in Ukraine, the Philippines, Papua New Guinea, and in this city whose careers are filled with meaninglessness, whose marriages or families are crumbling, whose communities are torn apart, and who experience despair and at the very core of their being. This Special Contribution allows these people to experience the blessing in career, kin, community, and core which can only come by knowing and following God. This Special Contribution allows Ps. 128 and Ps. 131 to become their songs.

In January, Lawana Maxwell, David Ralston and I visited Nathan and Karen Luther in the Philippines. While there, we toured the Shiloh Christian School which is run by Nathan and Karen and Nathan’s parents, Alvin and Fe. The school began when people in the Philippines noticed what a healthy marriage and family Alvin and Fe had and they asked Alvin and Fe to help them have healthy marriages and families. People in Bacolod saw how knowing and following God had blessed the kinship of Alvin and Fe, and they wanted that blessing. So, Alvin

and Fe began tutoring children and their parents in the ways of God. Eventually, that turned into the Shiloh Christian School. The school is renowned in Bacold and hosts children from England, China, and around the world. Many of the children and their parents eventually become Christians.

While at a meeting of the church at the Shiloh Christian School, we met a man named Wayne. He's on the left in this picture. Wayne's father is on the right. Wayne's parents were baptized by Alvin Luther years ago. Wayne grew up in the Bacolod church and graduated from Shiloh Christian School. He went on to study engineering in college. He now teaches engineering at two colleges in the city, leads worship at the congregation, and is in the rotation to preach regularly at the church. The Luther's knew the blessing of knowing and following God, passed that blessing on to Wayne's father, who passed it on to Wayne, who now passes it on to others.

While in Bacolod, we also met a 9th grader named Ariel. Ariel's parents are separated. His home life has been difficult. Ariel started attending Shiloh and then started attending the congregation. The Luther's believe he'll be baptized very soon. Ariel is a man who knows the despair of life without God. Soon, he'll know the joy of knowing and following God. Our Special Contribution makes all of this possible.

Joe and Betty Canon, who serve in Ukraine, recently hosted a guest from Bila Tserkva named Marina. Marina was just a young girl when she met Betty in Bila Tserkva. Betty began teaching Marina English and helped Marina read the Bible. Eventually, Joe baptized both Marina and Marina's mother. Both are regularly attend the Bila Tserkva Church of Christ. We recently interviewed the three of them. Here's the story they shared: Did you catch her answer to my question, "What do you like most about being a Christian?" She said, "Hope." Marina has experienced what [Ps. 131](#) promises to all who know and follow God – hope. Even when all else is removed, at her core she has found that hope comes simply from being with God. Our Special Contribution makes all of that possible.

Highland did not move from East Memphis to the suburbs to keep the blessing of knowing and following God to ourselves. We are not here to make a Christian ghetto where church becomes all about us. This new facility and new campus is a fountain head from which the blessing of knowing and following God is going to flow to others. Our Special Contribution on May 23 is one way that flow begins.

We want you to know this blessing as well. Having heard [Ps. 128](#) and [Ps. 131](#), you may realize this morning just how much you need God in your life: for your career, for your kin, for your community, and for your core. You may realize you're not living with the peace and blessing that comes from fearing God and walking in his ways. We would love to talk more with you about this. This morning, you can stop at the Shepherd's Corner where a couple of our elders will be happy to carry on this dialogue—it's at the table and chairs adjacent to our offices. Or, I invite you to email me, or any staff member, this week and we'll set up a time to talk more about making these two songs your songs. Right now, we're going to stand and sing. Some of

our elders, staff members, and spouses will move into the aisles. They are happy to pray with you about your walk with God as we sing.

¹ Jonathan Hill, What Has Christianity Done Ever Done For Us? (IVP Academic, 2005). Interview at <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2006/mayweb-only/118-32.0.html>.

² Derek Kidner, Psalms 73-150 Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (IVP, 1973), 443.

³ Walvoord, John F. ; Zuck, Roy B. ; Dallas Theological Seminary: *The Bible Knowledge Commentary : An Exposition of the Scriptures*. Wheaton, IL : Victor Books, 1983-c1985, S. 1:887