

Psalm 152 // Bring Up This People

Exodus 33:12-23; Matthew 22:15-22

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Brian Russo

What's the point?

February 5, 2016. My house. The Basement. My mom and I are watching the Super Bowl as Anya tends to Seth upstairs. Midway through the third quarter, it's 28-3, Falcons, and the Patriots begin their 8th drive. My mom looks over to me, and asks: "Why are the Patriots even trying; *What's the point?*" And right then and there I knew. I knew. It was over. The Patriots were going to somehow, miraculously, win that game. Because see, whenever my mom utters the phrase "What's the Point?" she taps into some cosmic jinx and everything that you once thought was set in stone crumbles at an instance. I yelled, "Ma! You just lost the Falcons the Super Bowl and me a \$100 bet!" And sure enough, in about an hour's time I was out a Benjamin and Tom Brady was shaking Roger Goodell's hand.

What's the point?

A month ago, at a bar in New Jersey, some friends got into a conversation about the hardships of parenting in 2017. How do we adequately save for college? How do we regulate texting and approach sexting? How do we mitigate screen time, more-so now that our schools require of our children to do most of their work on devices? But the main talking point, surprisingly, somewhat abstractly, and certainly humorously, was "what's the point of having kids, at all?" They are an utter drain. They near you towards bankruptcy. They are a strain on the marriage and the cultivation of self. And, they won't even remember all of the sleepless nights, all of the diapers changed, all of the numbing sacrifice suffered and offered on their behalf in their first years of life. What's the point, especially when they grow up to talk back to you, when they lie to you as teenagers, when they promptly leave the nest for college (without thanking you adequately for the 18-years of savings for said event), and then move on so completely it's as if you were never significant in the first place.

What's the point?

This past week, at Theology on Tap, Taylor Slaughter held me for a moment after, and asked if I could explain the point of a particular passage in scripture that the Women's Circle at our church was having difficulty with. Dolores Edwards and Betsey Simes asked me the same question the next day in Bible Study. The text in question came from the letter to the Hebrews, and focused on the notion of suffering for gain. As in, God ordains our suffering, and it is somehow for our benefit; a strengthening of our character. And so, we should endure suffering with grace. Well, what's the point in that, especially when so many (namely, Dolores and Betsey), suffer so needlessly and so disproportionately with the rest of the world. What point could possibly be made by yet another diagnosis, another disaster, another wildfire, another death, another trial of pain? What's the point of God's will being done, if that will is also the grand author of our misery?

What's the point?

Several thousand years ago, Moses found himself talking face to face with God in the tent of meeting (Exodus 33:11 – just one verse before the start of our own). And apparently that dynamic

continued for some time. But then, suddenly, without warning or explanation, that all changed, and God no longer wanted to meet him in that way, face to face (our text). What's the point in doing everything you ask, in leading these insufferable people through the desert, if you're not even going to look me in the eye anymore when we talk, Moses must have thought? And so, twice Moses seeks God's affirmation. God's confirmation of favor. *Just at least show me that I still matter to you, that the people are still in your grace.* And yet twice God leaves him with an unexpected, less-than-satisfactory answer. "I will be gracious to who I will be gracious, and show mercy to who I will show mercy." Ok? So, not everyone, but only who you choose? Okay... *And, more, when I pass by you Moses, you can no longer see my face, but only my backside. Oh, and guess what, this whole leading the people to the promised land of milk and honey. Yeah, about that. Those ungrateful, complaining plebs will get to enter the land, but you, you will die on a mountain from a distance, only catching a glimpse of everything you have given your life to trying to achieve.*

So, what's the point?

A month ago my friend died. Not just a friend, a best friend. A friend from childhood. From elementary school. From middle and high school, from college. My friend Jeff took his own life. The same Jeff, who I preached about just last year, praising God for the good news of his incredible turnaround from depression and alcohol abuse. So what was the point of that? Jeff grew up just a couple streets away and yet my blessings were tenfold in comparison. Where was his mercy, his favor? A good kid. Kind, compassionate, smart. Loved helping others. And yet grace never seemed to find him. Drugs, alcohol, abuse; passed down. And yet, he pushed through and made it to college. Went to Seton Hall with me, but then a fire freshman year finished him off. He fell from three floors out of a burning window. He survived but he was never the same. Filled with regret for not knocking on his neighbor's door who was engulfed alive in flames, in the hallway they shared. Why him? Why always Jeff? There was no family unit or healthy nucleus to return to. To comfort him. No mercy. No grace. No favor. What was the point? What was the point of his life, his narrative, his demise, his death? Or...is that the point, God? That, as you just said, simply, some are favored, while others aren't? That to some, You are gracious, and to others, You aren't?

Well, if true, what then would be the point to any of this?

What would be the point of what I'm doing here if I couldn't even proclaim good news to all people? To Jeff? To someone who needed me? Who called out to me, who turned to me? What would be the point of being a pastor, if I justified myself, like I did that fateful Saturday, to be too busy to pick up the phone when he called in his last moment of distress. What would be the point of this call if I felt too preoccupied to answer his? What's the point in my training, the power of scripture, if it was all helpless in the face of his darkness? True darkness? What's the point of working with young people, trying to guide them, navigating them through life's trials, if I myself am impotent when challenged with the question: what is the point?

Well, what's the point of your questions, asks Christ to the Pharisees. Asks Christ now to me. Your questions serve no purpose as they are but a trick. They deceive. For the answers you are looking for and the response you want of me, it doesn't exist. At least, not in the way you expect or desire. For there is no black and white. There is no yes, always. And no no always. There are things that are of the emperors of this world, and there are things that are God's. And that's just the way it is. For now at least, here on fallen Earth. And so trying to iron it all out, to simplify it further than that, is a wrong question and a pointless endeavor.

So what then, ultimately, is the point of your sermon, the Spirit now confronts me, here after Friday night's lock-in, after Saturday's all-day Harry Potter Carnival. What are you trying to achieve? What is the good news?

What is the point, Brian?

I think, finally, it is this:

That truly, for now, we only see through a mirror dimly. That there are simply some things that we will never fully understand, and, there are some questions to which there are no answers for, or at least, none that will ever satisfy. That, in this mortal life, we are yet destined to only catch glimpses of the divine, fleeting glimpses, backsides, because our vision and comprehension is simply obstructed by our humanity. Our sinful, finite, limited flesh and sheer humanity.

There are things of this world that are just of the emperor's. Of the realm of empires where nature and genetics strikes us down and tyrants and bullies govern by the strong fists of injustice, misdirection, and oppression. This life, this earthly bound life, will just never be perfect. And because of that sheer and simple truth, for a lot of us, there will be pain. There will be misery. There will be little favor. And none of it will ever be for our gain.

But, there will also come, in this life, the unexpected. Those moments where grace will somehow surprise us. Where the dark corners of our somber rooms will be illuminated by the light and the beautiful. Even if just for a moment. A fleeting moment. There will be light.

And, it is up to us to witness it. More, to witness *to* that, and, as agents commissioned by Christ, to even be those lights unto others. To embody those glimpses. So that this people are brought up. So that all people are brought up and may know otherworldly grace.

My friends, I guess the point of what I'm trying to say is no more simple than this: be of good courage. Do not give in. Keep trying. Keep fighting. No matter the score. Do it for your friends. Do it for your family. Do it for your community. Do it for the future. Even if the future is not your own, but a child's and a youth's and a people who will follow. Do it for them, their education, their betterment. Do it for them. So that none will ever have to feel like Jeff; so that all might have a better chance to come face-to-face with those glorious promises of presence, rest, and hope.

Hope... it is probably foolish and no doubt naïve, but I hope... I hope that indeed there one day will come a day of peace. A time of love and not of war. A time when pain and suffering will be no more. When all debt will be forgiven and celebrated in jubilee. Where every shackle will be broken and all the oppressed set free. Where every tear will be wiped from our eyes. And death finally destroyed. For love and life has come down to reign, here and now and by God forevermore.

Hallelujah!

Hallelujah.

Hallelujah...

Amen.