

October 18, 2009
Saint Luke

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

When the Apostle Paul wrote, "behold, now is the day of salvation" (2 Corinthians 6:2), he announced a special and important quality of divine grace: It is time-sensitive. It is always a matter of "today."

The time-sensitive quality of salvation was surely one of the chief lessons the Lord had in mind for Israel to learn during those long years of desert wandering. For instance, almost as soon as they left Egypt, God's people were taught to depend on His gift of a "daily bread." Each morning they were to gather that food from heaven, just sufficient to last a single day. They were forbidden to hold any of it over to the next day. The bread was always to be fresh; it was never to be day-old bread. Manna was time-sensitive. It had a very limited shelf-life; it would not keep until tomorrow. It was always "now" (Exodus 16).

Indeed, we may say the Israelites learned this lesson the hard way, inasmuch as their major failure was a refusal to meet the "now" of divine grace. I have in mind their refusal to enter the Promised Land on the appointed day (Numbers 13--14). We recall that the Lord, in punishment for that disobedience, condemned all the adults among them to wander in the desert for the rest of their lives. That is to say, the day of their deliverance was gone; it was over. It was "now" no more.

Not understanding this time-sensitive quality of the divine visitation, the disobedient people then decided---all on their own---to go to the Promise Land "the next day." They were not successful, of course, for the Lord was no longer among them (14:40-45).

This time-sensitive quality of salvation became a major thesis in Psalm 95 (Greek and Latin 94), a text about those forty years in the wilderness: "Today, if you hear His voice, harden not your hearts as at the offense on the day of temptation in the desert, where your fathers tempted Me and put Me to the test and beheld My works. Forty years I was offended with that generation and said: 'They always wander in their hearts, and they have not known My ways,' so I swore in My wrath: 'They shall not enter into My rest.'"

This psalm stands as a warning that all of us---we distant heirs of the desert assembly---are capable of a like infidelity and hardness of heart. What happened in the desert to Israel of old can also happen "today." The day of decision is always "now," because the gift of salvation is "today."

This point was made in the earliest Christian exegesis of Psalm 95, found in chapters 3 and 4 of the Epistle to the Hebrews. This work was addressed to a

Christian congregation which, the author feared, was in serious danger of falling away from the faith. After quoting the above lines of our psalm, he went on to comment: "Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God; but exhort one another daily, while it is called 'Today,' lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin. . . . Therefore, since a promise remains of entering His rest, let us fear lest any of you seem to have come short of it. For indeed the gospel was preached to us as well as to them" (3:12,13; 4:1,2).

To grasp the significance of this warning, we observe that Psalm 95 is about the divine election: "He is the Lord our God, and we are the people of His pasture and the sheep of His hand." In the context of Hebrews, however, this election of God is not an exercise in magic. Election is to be ratified in daily obedience, and this psalm speaks of the danger of failure, if the memory should fade and the heart be hardened.

When Israel left Egypt, it was because the Lord chose them, and He pledged to bring them into the Promised Land. By Israel's own decision, however, and under the limiting conditions of a specific day, this did not happen. For those Israelites who failed to meet the challenge of grace, that day of deliverance was never repeated. The offer was time-sensitive: It was "today only," and those who said "no" died in the desert. They had failed to remember that day-old Manna was not edible.

Several of the psalms are built around Israel's famous desert history, but none, I think, more famously than Psalm 95. This was the psalm in which the Epistle to the Hebrews discerned the danger run by those who "neglect so great a salvation" (2:3). This is why ancient custom recommends Psalm 95 to be prayed each morning.

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