

WITH is better than *From*
Deuteronomy 8, 11-19
Pastor Morgan Murray

We have been looking at the different postures – or ways of relating to God – that are so much less than what God wants to have with us. If we settle for Life Under God, then we experience God as capricious, and the ways we related to God are little more than empty ritual at best or superstition at worst. If we settle for Life Over God, then we may act as though God is utterly predictable. It's as though there is no relationship to be had at all.

This morning we will look at Life From God, in which God is seen as a divine butler, a cosmic therapist, and/or a heavenly vending machine. When we relate to God this way, we operate from the assumption that God's greatest desire is to bless us, to keep us comfortable, and to make us happy.

Now here I am, talking to Presbyterians. We are a dutiful bunch. We have a reputation for being very earnest, even grim. We are all about moderation. Yes, we say, God wants to bless us – but not too much! And only if we work really really hard. Yes God wants us to be reasonably comfortable, but a little hardship build character! And happiness is all fine and good as you don't go flaunting it everywhere!

Maybe we aren't as susceptible as others to the temptation of believing in vending machine God desperate for the opportunity to dispense more goodies on us. As I mentioned a couple weeks ago, I think our tribe can get pulled into a Life Under God view of things pretty easily. But here is what cannot be denied:

First, Life From God has enormous appeal, for all the obvious reasons. It is the default theology of many of the most popular and successful television preachers. It is also incredibly attractive in the developing world, where the message "God wants you to be rich" is proclaimed by preachers in the finest suit with a luxury vehicle conspicuously parked outside. Such so-called evangelists draw in the desperately poor by the thousands.

Second, Life From God has the appearance of being solidly biblical. There are surely hundreds of verses in scripture that describe God as the one who blesses, who causes our resources to increase, and who is intimately concerned with our welfare. The call to worship with which we began is based on two such passages. James assures us that....

Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights...

James 1:17 ESV

And Jesus himself assures us of God's generous and loving character when it comes to providing for our material needs:

11 Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? 12 Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? 13 If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"

Luke 11: 11-13

As a result, A Life From God theology is pretty hard to refute. Our culture is tailor-made for it. "So pastor, are you saying God doesn't want to bless me? Are you saying God wants me to be unhappy and miserable?"

Of course the answer is no. But that is not the same thing as saying that our happiness and comfort are God's chief concern. As we have come to see, what God longs for a life WITH us, and life in which we collaborate for the good of all creation. That is vision of Genesis 1-3. God's goal for us is not happiness, but holiness. In holiness we come to discover that God is enough, and God's provision is enough. In holiness we discover that, if we share, there is always more than enough. But when we hoard, then everyone and everything feels the scarcity.

Life WITH God is far greater than Life From God because it enables us to live in gratitude and contentment, trusting the Giver of all good gifts.

If the Israelites' time in the wilderness was intended to teach them anything, it was that a Life WITH God is the greatest source of shalom and security they could ever imagine. The wilderness was the place God wanted to teach them to depend and trust in the Giver, and not get caught up in the gifts. Why was this so important to God? Because God knew that the Israelites were headed to the land flowing with milk and honey. They were going to have more, and have it with greater ease, than they could ever have dreamed.

Text

Deut 8:11-19 NRSV

11 Take care that you do not forget the LORD your God, by failing to keep his commandments, his ordinances, and his statutes, which I am commanding you today. 12 When you have eaten your fill and have built fine houses and live in them, 13 and when your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied, 14 then do not exalt yourself, forgetting the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, 15 who led you through the great and terrible wilderness, an arid wasteland with poisonous snakes and scorpions. He made water flow for you from flint rock, 16 and fed you in the wilderness with manna that your ancestors did not know, to humble you and to test you, and in the end to do you good. 17 Do not say to yourself, "My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth." 18 But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth, so that he may confirm his covenant that he swore to your ancestors, as he is doing today. 19 If you do forget the LORD your God and follow other gods to serve and worship them, I solemnly warn you today that you shall surely perish.

Why was the wilderness experience such an important teaching moment, as far as God was concerned? It was because God knows that the human heart is an idol factory, as John Calvin so memorably put it. God knows that we are all too prone to take good things and make them ultimate things. God wasn't leading the people to the Promised Land so that they could be happy and comfortable. Those were to be the byproducts of the real goal: Showcasing a with-God life to all the other nations so that they would want one too. Moses and God know how easy it is to focus on the blessing while forgetting that God blesses in order that we can be a blessing to others.

If we want to interrupt our Life From God tendencies, there are three easy steps.

1. Be thankful.
2. Be generous.
3. Repeat.

Happiness has never been found in having what you want, but instead by wanting what you have. There is no greater remedy to feelings of scarcity than to stop, say, "thank you God," and then share what you have.

A Life From God always feeds fear because it focuses on what you don't have yet, or fear you might not get.

A Life WITH God grows more contented over time because dwells always and forever in divine, all-sufficient Presence. A Life WITH God celebrates God's generosity by being generous in turn.

The generosity of the Lord is shown at this table.