



The Reflector

Published and edited monthly in the interest of calling people back to the Bible
by Edward O. Bragwell, Sr.

March 2008

"Bless Our God"

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Oh, bless our God, you peoples! And make the voice of his praise to be heard. (Psalm 66: 8 NKJV).

Psalms 65 and 66 are songs of praise. They were likely composed at the same time – likely at the end of the year (see 65: 11). Both call upon Israel to praise God for his goodness toward them. Just as Israel had so much to praise God for, so do we. We individually and collectively as the children of God in this country have so many reasons to praise God for his blessings.

Let's examine what the psalmist himself had in mind in these two psalms.

Material Prosperity

In Chapter 65:9-13, God is praised for blessing their crops and pastures. This allowed their grain and flocks to flourish. God richly blessed them materially.

Since World War II, this country has enjoyed a prosperity unprecedented in world history. Compare our standard of living with that of just a few years ago, to say nothing of that of a generation or two ago. I tell my children that when I was growing up that we did not have wall-to-wall floors, to say nothing of wall-to-wall carpet and that when you spoke of drywall, it meant that the roof was not leaking. Compare the cars we drive and the clothes we wear with that of our parents and their parents before them. Think of the things that we can now buy in the marketplace to make our lives more comfortable and pleasant that were not available to anyone just a few years ago. Just think of the household appliances and electronics that most of us have in our houses today. If we could have had them in my early childhood, we would not have had the electricity to run them.

Congregations have prospered materially as well. Compare the buildings and other facilities with those of just a few years ago, especially in rural communities.

Central heating and air has replaced the old potbellied stove, and the funeral home fans. The hard seats of yesteryear have been replaced with cushioned pews. Paved parking lots have replaced the mud that surrounded many buildings. And state-of-the-art sound systems allow us to hear those preachers and others who take a public part in our worship, who are not blessed with a strong voice. Many churches, who could not afford full-time preachers to work with them in the community, now have them. Brethren, we have been so richly blessed materially. Let us pray to God that we have the sense and gratitude needed to use all these things wisely.

God's Working in History

"He turned the sea into dry land; they went through the river on foot. There we will rejoice in him." (66: 6). I believe the psalmist is speaking of the deliverance of Israel at the Red Sea in the first phrase, and the crossing of the Jordan into Canaan in the second phrase. I understand that God's hand in these two events was miraculous in nature. But when you look at the history of Israel as a whole you can see God's helping hand at work in their lives – both miraculously and providentially. Though the age of miracles ceased with the complete revelation of God's will for man by the end of the first century (1 Corinthians 13; Jude 3), God's providence continues to work in the affairs of men (Matthew 6: 25-33; 1 Corinthians 10: 13).

I know that we cannot always point to a specific event today and know with absolute certainty that it is an act of providence. But I do believe that the Bible clearly teaches that God's providence continues to work today in the affairs of men.

Would I be too presumptuous if I were to say that God's providence has been at work in our own history as a nation? Our forefathers were able to form a nation free of state-sponsored and state-imposed religion. This was at

a time when religious tyranny was rampant in Europe from one source or another. Such freedom to worship provided an atmosphere for the “Restoration Movement” to become a reality and to thrive. Most of us in America who are beneficiaries of the preaching of the pure gospel, whether we realize it or not, owe our salvation to that movement. Of course, we understand that ultimately we owe our salvation to the gospel which they preached and which the apostles preached before them – and to the Subject of that gospel, Jesus Christ and him crucified for our sins and raised the third day of our justification (Romans 4: 25). But I am sure that none of us can fathom the depth of God’s providence at work in history in order to put the gospel into our hands.

God’s Refinement through Trials

In 66: 10-12, he says: **“For You, O God, have tested us. You have refined us as silver is refined. You brought us into the net; You laid affliction upon our backs. You have caused men to ride over our heads; We went through fire and through water; But You brought us out to rich fulfillment.”**

The psalmist is saying to God, “You have refined us through trials and made us spiritually rich.” God has always used adversity to purify and refine His people. That is the reason that James admonishes us to count it all joy to fall into temptations and trials (James 1: 2-4). The chastisement or discipline that the Hebrew writer spoke of in Chapter 12 is persecution that the Lord uses for his purposes of discipline, according to the context of

this passage. God can even use factions among brethren as a tool of refinement for his church (1 Corinthians 11: 19). One should not tempt God by seeking trials, but when they come, God uses them to his and our advantage. (Cf. Matthew 4: 6-7; 1 Corinthians 10: 13). This gives us reason to “rejoice in tribulation.”

Spiritual Satisfaction

“Iniquities prevail against me; As for our transgressions, You will provide atonement for them. Blessed is the man You choose, And cause to approach You. That he may dwell in Your courts. We shall be satisfied with the goodness of Your house, Of Your holy temple.” (65: 3-4). **“Come and hear, all You who fear God, And I will declare what he has done for my soul.”** (66: 16).

Here the writer expresses his satisfaction with the goodness of God’s house and what God has done for his soul. He declares that God had provided atonement (NKJ), forgiveness (ASV), or purging (KJV) for his sins. Surely, today we are satisfied with the goodness and sufficiency of God’s house, the church (1 Timothy 3: 15) – at least, I would hope so.

God has blessed us with all spiritual blessings in Christ Jesus. He has made each of us a part of his spiritual house, of his holy nation, of his holy and royal priesthood, as his own special people (1 Peter 2: 5-9) – how can we not “bless our God!”

No wonder the psalmist said, “Make a joyful noise unto God ... (66: 1-2). edbragwell@gmail.com

Grow Up

Stephen Russell

“Grow up” is a curious phrase that is used frequently for a variety of reasons. It is generally used to indicate that the receiver of said phrase is less mature than his years would indicate. It bears consideration though as to what type of growing up we would like to be done and even whether the growing up ought to be done. As we consider this idea of growing up in today’s society I believe we will find that in some ways (the wrong ones) growing up is happening entirely too quickly and in other ways (the fruitful ones) is not happening at all.

To begin with, Jesus instructs that we should be as little children (Matt. 18:3) while Paul suggests that we

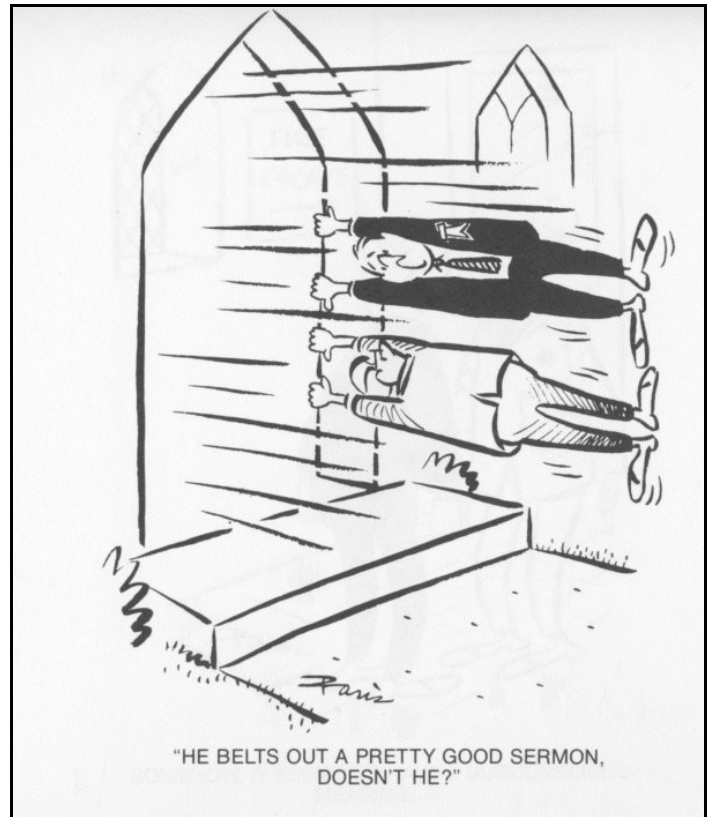
should “no longer be children, tossed to and fro by every wind of doctrine” (Eph. 4:14). We have what may seem to be a conflict of teaching. Don’t grow up, grow up! Obviously there is growing up that needs to be done – certain childish characteristics that must be put away. All the while there are certain child-like traits that Jesus would have us to retain. It would seem that when folks pronounce that kids are growing up too quickly these days, they mean that children are losing those virtuous characteristics of which Jesus speaks. As if this weren’t bad enough, they also retain those characteristics that are condemned by the apostle Paul. The product is children

without innocence. Not the children Jesus is longing for. Let us consider the nature of what kind of growing up needs to be done and what kind does not.

Grow up in the realm of responsibility. Too many adults find themselves no less dependent upon others to do for them than they were as little children. We are not discussing those who are physically disabled and therefore truly helpless, but rather those who are too lazy or unconcerned to do a job. Children quickly tire of any particular task and decide that they can no longer perform the work at hand. We look around and find this to be the case in so many workplaces today. More distressing than this we find this attribute abounding in many churches as well. Also there is a lack of obligation. The only obligation many feel is to themselves. Who cares about commitments? There is no heed taken to the duties one has taken on but rather only to one's own comfort. God's word is quite plain with regards to working (II Thess. 3:10; I Tim. 5:8). The Lord has also spoken clearly with regards to our responsibility to the church (Heb. 10:24-25). Grow up and do your job.

Grow up in the realm of stability. Paul talks about being tossed to and fro by every wind of doctrine. This same instability reaches to the whole of our lives. As we move beyond childhood and into adulthood we ought to move to being more stable people. We hold down jobs. We are more easily satisfied. We are not always looking for the greener grass that youth seeks after. Doesn't sound like the world today does it? It is truly frightening, however, to see among God's people those who are still seeking for something different. Elders, deacons, and preachers who after so many years of service become discontented with this life and discover satisfaction in sexual misconduct. Or those who leave the service of God for the pursuit of money. It is heartbreaking and urges us to cry out "GROW UP!" "Now godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out. And having food and clothing, with these we shall be content." (I Tim. 6:6-8).

Grow up in the realm of understanding. Understanding is something that requires honesty and effort. One must put forth effort to gain the information and employ honesty to properly interpret that information. Those with normal mental faculties have all the ability they need to understand God's word. Those who do not understand have either not put forth the effort or time needed to come to that understanding or they



have seen the information and do not like the resulting conclusions. Too often when we don't understand something we are satisfied with that. Instead of saying, "I must put more time into that" or "My beliefs have been challenged I shall have to examine further to be sure of my conviction", rather we say, "Well that's one of those difficult things that Peter said Paul wrote about", or, "It doesn't matter what the information is I still believe what I want too." We should never be satisfied with not understanding God's word. We must also be aware that ignorance will be no excuse when we stand before the Almighty. He requires that we know Him (Heb. 5:12-14; Rom. 1:20-21).

Be childlike in purity. Too often when someone says grow up they mean that you should be aware of carnal things. We should not be ashamed to be ignorant of worldly things. There are a great many things of which I am proud to be completely ignorant and hope to remain so. Our primary knowledge should be in things above (Phil. 4:8-9). Some may think us childish because we do not participate in various acts of ungodliness. They view adherence to religious standards as kiddy stuff. When we get older we can do as we please. In this area there is wholly too much growing up. To be pure is not childish but rather the child-like nature that Jesus called for. As

His people we stay pure no matter our age. We never outgrow righteousness (I Tim. 5:22).

Be childlike in humble obedience. There seems to be a breakdown in humility all together. Instead of hearing respect your elders children are told don't take anything off anybody. "I'm grown" is the phrase of the day. Unfortunately, not only are they mistaken but they have learned this phrase from there parents who also apparently are not grown. It is easy to see when we are children that everybody else is bigger than us and that we need the assistance very often from those who are bigger. Too soon, however, we begin to think that because we are growing and can do more things on our own that we don't need others. Children are also told that they are the most important thing. You look out for you. When someone is compliant and respectful to those in authority, he is told to grow up: "Don't let anyone tell you what to do". How terribly unfortunate are those who listen to such admonitions. God will not tolerate those who will not obey Him. God has no patience for those who do not empty themselves of foolish pride and realize that they are helpless before Him. We have our example in the Son (Phil. 2:5-8).

Grow up? Yes, grow up indeed. But be sure that whatever growing we do is in the Lord and not in the world. "But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ." (II Pet. 3:18).

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Relative Righteousness

Dan Shipley

When asked by a stranger whether he considered his wife attractive, a certain rancher replied, "Compared to what?" Many are inclined to measure their standing with God in much the same fashion. By some standard most justify themselves as being "good enough to get by" spiritually. Honest and discerning men will recognize this popular practice to be wrong for several reasons.

In the first place, what pleases self does not necessarily please God. It would appear unnecessary to point this out were it not for the widespread notion that personal preference ought to be respected on a par with divine revelation. Paul's preaching gave emphasis to how

men "ought to walk and to please God" (1 Thess. 4:1). This principle is controverted by the subjective philosophy of moderns who put the emphasis on what pleases the individual. The fundamental question to be resolved is not whether my religion satisfies me, but whether it pleases God. With Paul, our aim must be "to be well pleasing unto Him" (2 Cor. 5:9).

Secondly, pleasing God involves more than just being better than someone else. Paul wrote of certain ones who commended themselves as they measured and compared themselves by themselves. He concludes them to be without understanding (2 Cor. 10:12). As the self-righteous Pharisee of Lk. 18, most can find a despised "publican" with which to compare and exonerate himself. What is the consolation in a relative righteousness that sees self as being "better" than another sinner if I am less than God wants me to be? Some seem to take delight in finding fault with Christians — as though the Christian's sins could somehow excuse his own. Someone (Abraham Lincoln, I think) has said in this connection, "Short men do not grow taller by cutting off the legs of tall men". Is anyone complimented in being "as good" as the hypocrite in the church? It is a poor system of justification that can only find credit for self by discrediting others.

A similar, but more subtle method of self-justification is the appeal to a high moral standard. It goes further than just being better than some; it prides itself in having higher moral standards than most and may even include being a loyal worker in some church group. "Surely", some would think, "this is good enough to take me to heaven!" But it's only the same misconception in different wrappings. Self is still Judge and men still the standard. We must look higher.

True righteousness means being right with God and is possible only on His terms. Through faith man subjects himself to God's will (Matt. 7:21) as set forth in the gospel. Therein is God's plan for making man righteous (Rom. 1:17). As man expresses his faith in repentance and baptism (Mk. 16:17; Acts 2:38), he is pardoned by God's grace and thus becomes a servant of righteousness (Rom. 6:17,18). Remaining righteous means doing righteousness (1 Jn. 3:7) to the best of our abilities and seeking God's forgiveness wherein we fall short. Entrusting my soul to what I think may be right is wrong. Doing what God says can never be wrong.

Via [Charlottesville Beacon](#)