CENTER FOR STEWARDSHIP

Your Story Living Submissively: The Glory of the Mundane

INTRODUCTION

"Hours of and hours of boredom, punctuated with moments of sheer terror." It's a saying that has been used to describe activities from sailing to serving as a soldier, from flying an airliner to working as a paramedic. With little effort or imagination, the list could be expanded to include other professions and other experiences. With slight revision, perhaps it also could be applied to the Christian life: "hours and hours punctuated with moments of meaning and significance." Cursory observation of the lives typical of many American Christians might lend credibility to this point of view.

Thinking about the Christian people you know, how would you characterize the "meaning and significance factor" of ordinary Christian living? What are some of the meaningful and significant things that Christians seem to value?

As much as humans are creatures of habit and contentedly bound to routines, they crave special events and significant moments that sparkle in the midst of ordinary life. Christians are no different. In fact, Christians might be even more inclined to prize the extraordinary things. Whatever is miraculous, supernatural, or spiritual is prized by believers. These experiences seem to resonate with divinity and holiness and so are considered superior to the routine experiences that comprise everyday life. This yearning for evidence of divine activity may even devolve into a need for such special moments to validate and reassure the conviction of faith. This is a dangerous place to be; such thinking is at odds with the truths of Christian faith.

One of the great treasures of Christian teaching is its emphasis on the significance, value, and even holiness of what is usually deemed ordinary and inconsequential in our regular day-to-day living. Admittedly, in their quest for experiences that are supernatural and extraordinary, many Christians ignore this central truth, but it remains a component of God's reality nonetheless. The point is simple yet profound: when people do what God put them here to do, then what they are doing is good, significant, and holy because it is done in conformity with God's will. It does not matter what others think. It does not matter if the work is heroic or spectacular by human standards. It does not matter if the work is so commonplace as to be unnoticeable. It does not matter that no one appreciates the work. That which is done according to the design of God, fulfilling his plan for his creatures, is profoundly meaningful, beautiful, and divine.

So, the woman in the final years of life, who spends much of her day praying for her family, her church, her caregivers, and her world, and who graciously receives the care provided to her and speaks words of encouragement to all, is doing godly, holy work. The teenager who is striving to be a son who honors his parents, a student who values his education, an employee who respects his boss, and a friend who points his peers to walk in truth, is doing wonderful and holy work. The man who spends time reading to his children each night, and who makes time each day to whisper words of love to his wife is doing what is divine and holy. The mother who spends her day feeding, clothing, teaching, washing, and raising children to know and love God and his ways is doing profoundly important and holy work. Life lived God's way is as meaningful and as significant as it gets. Boredom is in the eye of the beholder, and the one who grasps God's perspective on life does not live for the moments of otherworldly glory. That person has learned that the greatest possible glory is simply to do what God gives to do. Nothing surpasses that. That we might better appreciate and live this truth is the goal of the study that follows.

Paul emphasizes both of these truths in a remarkable outpouring of praise and dense theology in Ephesians chapter one. It is not the easiest section of the Bible to understand, but it is beautifully comforting and essential to a right understanding of the Christian life.

Q & A

1. The Bible tells many stories about ordinary people doing ordinary things in their lives—and finding God's favor in the process. As you read the narrative accounts in the following passages consider this question: who are the central figures, and what are they doing?

   I Samuel 16:10-13
   Judges 6:11-14
   I Samuel 2:18-21
   I Kings 19: 19-21
   Luke 2:36-38

2. What aspects or traits, though quite unrelated, are common to all five stories?

3. Read I Corinthians 1:26-31. How does Paul's description of the Corinthian Christians relate to the five stories considered above? What lesson could be derived for twenty-first-century Christians?

4. Read Psalm 24:1. It is routine to distinguish between what is sacred and what is secular. How do you understand the difference between them (use examples of each)? What difference does this text make for the popular idea of secular/sacred divide?

5. Read I Samuel 10:7. What is surprising about Samuel's counsel to Saul? What adjustments need to be made for this counsel to be valid today?

6. Turn to Ecclesiastes 9:7-10. What is your reaction to this counsel? Would living according to this counsel be the action of bold faith, cynical realism, pessimistic despair, or abject unbelief?

7. Verse 10 echoes the counsel of Samuel to Saul. How would you explain the advice of the Preacher (the self-described author of Ecclesiastes) to a Christian who is trying to determine God's will for an important life decision?

8. The word, mundane, comes from the Latin word for world. How might the advice of the Preacher in Ecclesiastes 9 be an encouragement to live a mundane life? How would you defend the assertion that one can live a mundane life and never suffer from boredom?

9. Consider I Corinthians 13:1-3. Remember that love is always in action in the context of real life—within the ordinary relationships and circumstances that make up everyday existence. With that in mind, how do these verses warn us against allowing the pursuit of "big things" to cause us to miss the wonder of mundane and ordinary life?

10. What are some of the mundane parts of your life that deserve a bit more attention and intentionality? What will it mean for you in the days ahead to embrace the wonder and meaning of ordinary, mundane life?

PRAYER

Praise God for the gift of life and the blessing of having opportunities to do meaningful work within this world. Pray for those who are busy doing mundane work and ask God to encourage them in their labor.