

## RAVENS AND LILIES

There are few things we admire more than the self-made man or woman.

One of the most popular authors in American history was a man named Horatio Alger, who wrote dime novels back in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century about people who started out at the bottom of the barrel and worked their way up through “luck, pluck and virtue.”

Rags to riches—log cabin to the White House—it’s the All-American story about people who make the most of opportunity to make the most of themselves.

Our love for it is reflected in our popular sayings.

*“Pull yourself up by your own bootstraps!”*

*“When the going gets tough the tough get going.”*

*“The Lord helps those who help themselves.”* (Some people think that’s from the Bible but it’s not.)

Ambition, determination and grit—that’s what it takes to live the American dream in an upwardly mobile, classless society.

We treasure that narrative and we’re willing to defend it with our lives.

So to people with the cultural “ears” that we have, today’s Scripture passages might sound a little strange.

There’s absolutely nothing in them about hard work or perseverance or self-improvement.

Quite the opposite: they describe us as passive recipients of God’s blessings.

In the *Book of Exodus*, Moses instructs the Israelites: *“God will fight for you, you need only to be still.”*

In *Psalms 46* God says, *“Be still, and know that I am God.”*

In the *Sermon on the Mount*, Jesus urges us, *“Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body what you will wear.”*

In fact, don’t worry about tomorrow at all: instead, be like *“the ravens of the air”* that *“neither plant nor sow nor store away in barns,”* and like *“the lilies of the field”* that *“neither toil nor spin”* and rely completely upon God to supply all of their needs.

*“Do not worry, saying ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the pagans run after all these things and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first His*

*kingdom and His righteousness and all these things will be **given** to you as well.” (Matt. 6:25-34)*

When I first read these verses and tried to imagine applying them to my life, I had a hard time.

Maybe I could identify a little with the ravens as they fly around looking for food; but lilies of the field?

Plants are completely passive—not to mention brainless.

I couldn't think of myself as inert and brainless, even though my wife thought it might not pose much of a problem for me.

I guess that considering some of the decisions I've made in my life—or failed to make—maybe I should have taken them a little more to heart.

But seriously: be like a plant?

It's a little hard to swallow.

Why do we resist this analogy?

Doesn't the answer lie in one little word: pride?

We really, *really* want to believe that we can take care of ourselves and the idea that we are utterly dependent upon someone else to take care of us is repellant.

Beggars may have to depend on God or the kindness of strangers for what they eat and drink and wear, but we can take care of ourselves, thank you very much.

The thought that we should imitate beggars in this regard is obnoxious.

Yet the Bible tells us that that is exactly what we are in our relationship with God.

Not high achievers: just beggars.

If we were to measure a man in terms of his achievements, Martin Luther would be a candidate for the high achiever of all time.

He wrote over one hundred books, translated the entire Bible into German, pastored a church and composed hymns.

He launched the Reformation and in the process, defied the two most powerful men in the world—the Pope and the Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire.

For his efforts he was put under the imperial ban and lived the last half of his life under the death sentence.

And Luther accomplished all this while suffering from what nowadays would be called “clinical depression”—a condition so severe that some days he could not even get out of bed.

He was a remarkably strong and courageous man, yet he took no credit for himself and gave all glory to God and the power of God's Word.

"It was the Word," he said. "The Word did everything."

After he died, they found the following note in his pocket: "*We are all beggars; that's for sure.*"

All the good things we have and can expect to have come from God and from Him alone and we have nothing—repeat, *nothing*—to do with it.

Oh but we work for a living, don't we?

Sure we do.

But who gave us the work to do and the brains and hands to do it with?

Did we create our jobs out of nothing?

Did we create ourselves?

No. The Same One who gives us the things that proceed from our labor—our food and clothing and shelter—gave us the work to do and the strength to do it.

The first thing God did after he created Adam and placed him in the Garden of Eden was to work in it.

Did Adam create the garden—or the fruit that he ate or the seeds that he planted?

No. They came from the One who created him, gave him the work to do and the garden to do it in.

And so it is with us.

God supplies us with food and water and seed; we supply the eating and drinking and planting.

*We serve Him by letting Him serve us.*

Our model is Jesus Who said: “...*whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve....*”

There are only two things we can give God: *praise and thanksgiving.*

Praise is what we give God for Who He is and thanksgiving is what we offer Him for what he has done for us.

When we give all glory to God, we are simply giving credit where it is due.

God is not increased by our thanks and praise, ***but we are*** because ***praise and thanksgiving are powerful antidotes to pride.***

When we give all glory to God, His light shines into us and our pride evaporates.

And all He asks is for us to let that light shine through us so that others may see it.

Jesus said, “...*let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.*”

When we give all glory to God, we are simply coming to terms with reality, for God is the source of ALL good things.

Our faith, our prayers and our praises all ultimately derive from God.

When we give God glory instead of ourselves, the foundations of our pride begin to crumble.

The Scriptures literally overflow with the praise of God.

We are urged to praise Him four hundred and twenty-two times—two hundred and twenty-seven times in the *Psalms* alone.

The last *Psalm*—*Psalm 150*—urges us to praise God in every single verse and concludes: *“Let everything that has breath praise the Lord! Praise the Lord!”*

*And that’s during our life on earth!*

From what the Bible tells us about heaven, we will be praising God continually into eternity.

But some Christians say, *“Wait a minute--just how long can you praise anyone or anything and really mean it? I mean, if that’s all that heaven is about—won’t it be boring? Why does God need all this praise anyway?”*

Well, God doesn’t **need** to receive our praise: *it is we who need to give it* because it is the one thing that vanquishes our pride, which is the original sin of mankind.

When Satan lied to Eve, telling her than God didn’t mean it when He said, *“...for when you eat of it you will surely die,”* and that if she partook of the fruit, *“...your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil”*—he planted the seed of pride in her—a seed which immediately produced the fruit of rebellion.

And it still produces the fruit of rebellion in us.

Pride comes in many different forms and not all of them are obvious.



The derelict who has lost everything—or maybe never had anything to begin with—do you think he blames himself for his miserable condition?

Chances are he blames everyone BUT himself—his parents, the people who walk past him on the street, the government for not taking care of him, his former friends who have deserted him.

We have a remarkable ability to pin the blame for our troubles on everything and everyone other than ourselves.

And that, my friends, is driven as much by pride as the successful man's desire that others praise him for his success.

Solomon was blessed as a child with more wisdom than any other man who had ever lived.

Then he became infected with pride.

He built a magnificent temple for God, but then he built an even larger palace for himself.

To enlarge his empire he entered into treaties with pagan nations and ratified the treaties by marrying pagan wives and allowing them to promote pagan religion in Israel.

And as he glorified himself more and more he glorified God less and less.

Toward the end of his life Solomon sank into a depression and wrote: *“Meaningless, meaningless! Everything is meaningless!”*

John Calvin once said that man was created for one purpose and one purpose only, and that was to glorify God.

When we praise God ***in all circumstances***, we are doing what we were created to do.

Paul wrote in *Philippians*: *“Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, **with thanksgiving**, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”*

When we fill our thoughts and words and prayers with praise and thanksgiving, our pride withers like an unwelcome weed in the garden and our faith grows like a beautiful flower.

You can't see it or feel it growing any more than you can see a plant grow, but one day the full flower will be there.

Then you will be able to sing with all your heart: "Praise God from whom all blessings flow; Praise Him all creatures here below; Paise Him above ye heavenly host; Praise Father, Son and Holy Ghost!

Amen.