

- ***READ Psalm 40:1-5*** Though he is considered to be one of the greatest men of Israel to ever live, King David was not a man who was unfamiliar with the difficulties of life. The man whose throne would be eternally established is the same man who was pursued nearly to the point of death by King Saul, the man that he had shown full allegiance to. He suffered the loss of a child as a result of his own mistakes. He would then go on to suffer heartache as one of his own sons sought to usurp his throne from him. Though blessed in a multitude of ways, David knew what it was like to face the difficulties of life and feel the sting of loss in various ways.
- Perhaps it was these experiences that enabled David to be so skilled in writing psalms that focused on the the cries to God for help, deliverance, and thanksgiving. At least 15 of the Psalms found within the Psalter are noted as having been written by David and focusing on these particular ideas, and there are number of other Psalms along these lines that were not written by David. This leads me to the conclusion that it is a natural thing for people, kings included, to take time to write concerning everything that God has done for us in our times of difficulty within this life.
- Even men within modern times have taken to write songs that echo these same ideas. *Oh Thou Fount Of Every Blessing* immediately comes to mind as a song that clearly states our understanding that every blessing we enjoy in this life comes from God and we ought to be a people of immense gratitude for everything He has done for us. And yet the song we just sang together, *Count Your Blessings*, adds another layer concerning our need to be more than simply thankful during the good times of life. This song encourages us to be a people who are especially mindful of God's blessings during the times when we are struggling with life.
- This lesson will look this song that was written way back in 1897 by Johnson Oatman, Jr. A writer of over 5,000 hymns, *Count Your Blessings* is widely considered his greatest work. One writer said of this song, "Like a beam of sunlight it has brightened up the dark places of the earth." This hymn was especially popular in Great Britain, and the London Daily wrote of it, "In South London the men sing it, the boys whistle it, and the women rock their babies to sleep on this hymn." What about this song made it so popular? With this being the week where our country pauses to consider our need to be thankful for the blessings we all enjoy, let's consider over the next few minutes the arrangement of the lyrics of this song where each verse presents a problem that is directly followed by a solution to the stated problem. We'll first look at all of the problems together and then we will consider the prescribed solutions. Within these first half of these verses, there are a number of pictures that are painted to describe the difficulties that we experience in this life. The first brings the image to mind of people on a boat in the middle of a great storm.

When upon life's billows you are tempest tossed; When you are discouraged, thinking all is lost...

Are you ever burdened with a load of care? Does the cross seem heavy you are called to bear?

So amid the conflict, whether great or small; Do not be discouraged, God is over all.

I. The Problems:

A. We become discouraged by the difficult circumstances of life.

1. If you're like me then the first scene that comes to your mind is the episode in **Mark 4:35-41** when the Apostles are on the sea of Galilee as a storm comes up.

"On that day, when evening had come, he told them, "Let's cross over to the other side of the sea." So they left the crowd and took him along since he was in the boat. And other boats were with him. A great windstorm arose, and the waves were breaking over the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. He was in the stern, sleeping on the cushion. So they woke him up and said to him, "Teacher! Don't you care that we're going to die?"

2. While none of us have ever been on a literal boat that is getting beaten down by the billowing waves and scared for our lives while Jesus sleeps through it all...I would venture to say that there are a number of us, if not nearly all of us who have found ourselves in situations where we feel as if we are being beaten down on every side, and we don't feel as if there is any way that we can come out on the other side unscathed. Maybe we find ourselves sympathizing with Job during the great period of loss that he suffered in **Job 1:13-19**. In what seems to have been a short amount of time, Job lost nearly everything that was named to his possession...oxen, sheep, camels, servants, and worst of all his children.
 3. I would hope that none of us have ever been in a situation where the loss or difficulties were to that extreme, but that doesn't lessen the immense feelings of hurt and pain that we sometimes feel as we are tossed about by the waves of life. When we suffer loss of loved ones, loss of good health, loss of friendships, loss of financial means, loss of comforts, loss of reputation, loss of trust, or any combination of these things...can we truly say that it is a stretch to think that real doubt might begin to creep into our minds?
- B. We are weighed down by the worry and anxiety that comes from these circumstances.**
1. Of course, it is only natural for there to be the opportunity for us to not only doubt that there is any hope remaining for us, but we will likely also be feeling the immense weight of worry and anxiety. We stress about the outcomes of situations that we are concerned about. We might worry about what will be our outcome when all is said and done in these situations and circumstances. We might even worry about how other people will fair in times of trouble.
 2. I would contend that these types worry and anxiety are natural parts of this life and we should not think ourselves as being any less spiritually mature because we experience worries in this life. If we truly care about our own well being or the well beings of others then we will be concerned when things don't look as if they are going so well.
 3. Even Jesus showed that He experienced such feelings in His life. This is especially true just prior to His betrayal and crucifixion, and I think this is most clearly seen in John's Gospel. **(John 13-17)** Now, this doesn't mean that Jesus allowed for these feelings to have control over Him as we sometimes allow them to have control over us. In fact, I would suggest that Jesus's response to these feelings of worry and concern is the example that we should follow in turning to God in prayer when our hearts are heavy. However, we often fail to live up to Jesus's example, and the song indicates that our faiths might even be affected when we are being beaten around by the storms of life.
- C. We might begin to see our faith as not being worth the struggle.**
1. There are times that our difficulties in life are brought about as a result of the faith that we have put in Jesus Christ. We have committed to follow Him in whatever ways He directs and we come to realize that sometimes those places we have been called to go are no fun at all. When we find ourselves suffering and struggling because of the faith we are holding onto, we would be naive to think that Satan isn't going to use those moments to cause us to question whether or not our faith is worth the struggle and difficulties.
 2. We might see that type of attitude of discouragement as being one that is reserved only for those who are extremely young or weak in their faiths, but would you consider the great Prophet Elijah? **I Kings 19** shows us a great prophet of God that was greatly discouraged by what he was seeing all around him and even enduring himself. After having his life threatened by the wicked queen Jezebel, Elijah is terrified and flees into the wilderness where he begs God to just go ahead and take his life. **(19:4)** After a series of interactions with an angel, Elijah journeys 40 days to Horeb and Mt. Sinai.

3. The Lord appears to him while he is on the mountain and questions Elijah as to why he was there. Elijah responds with, *"I have been very zealous for the Lord God of Armies, but the Israelites have abandoned Your covenant, torn down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are looking for me to take my life."* (19:10) How strongly did Elijah feel with these thoughts? So strongly that he repeats them again a second time before the Lord shows him that he has been too concerned with his difficulties and unaware of the power that God had in 7,000 Israelites who were not going to bow the knee to Baal. Elijah was questioning whether all of this was worth it because he was completely focused on the struggle and not what God was doing through it all.

If we're all being honest with ourselves, we have probably found ourselves in similar situations to what we have talked about up to this point. We have found ourselves being wrecked by the storms of life, weighted down by worry and concern, and maybe even questioning whether or not our faiths are worth the struggle we are enduring. Mr. Oatman recognized that these are experiences common to the people of God, and he wanted to encourage all of those who might sing and hear this song of some important truths and benefits that come from counting the blessings of God.

Count your many blessings, name them one by one, and it will surprise you what the Lord hath done.

Count your many blessings, every doubt will fly, and you will be singing as the days go by.

Count your many blessings, angels will attend; help and comfort give you to your journey's end.

Count your blessings name them one by one! Count your blessings see what God hath done!

II. The Solutions

A. Take time to count our many blessings to recognize that God is with us and blessing us.

1. Each of the examples we have looked at up to this point were facing legitimate struggles in their lives at those specific points in time, but we can take a step back and recognize some blessings that were also present within their lives at those same moments.
 - a) First, the Apostles might have been out on the water at the wrong time with that storm blowing up, but how could they forget that they were on that water with the Man that Matthew's account (**Matthew 8:14-17**) tells us had just healed Peter's mother-in-law with the simple touch of His hand. This is followed by all sorts of miraculous occasions where demons are cast out and other sick people were healed. If ever they should have recognized a great blessing of God, it should have been with the fact that Jesus was there in the boat with them, and He had the power to calm the storm.
 - b) Job's heart must have been aching in ways I hope I never have to imagine, but instead of dwelling on the pain of what he was suffering through, he decided to exalt the name of God, the one who had blessed him as abundantly as He had up to this point. *"Then Job stood up, tore his robe, and shaved his head. He fell to the ground and worshiped, saying: **Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will leave this life. The Lord gives, and the Lord takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord. Throughout all this Job did not sin or blame God for anything.**"* (Job 1:20-22)
 - c) Jesus recognizes the fact that His Father is with Him in what He is doing, and He focuses on the fact that the Holy Spirit would soon come to bless His Apostles. Even in His time of immense concern for what was coming next, we can read of God's angels coming to minister to Jesus. (**Luke 22:43**) And then let's not forget the fact that Jesus had the blessing of being able to go to His Father in prayer.
 - d) Lastly, Elijah was so focused on his current struggles that he forgot about the blessings he had been receiving from God. He had just defeated the many prophets of Baal, and God's angel had just ministered to him. Then he's told of the 7,000 faithful men of Israel.

2. All of this simply goes to show us that we can find God's blessings in every situation if we will only open our eyes to look for them and be able to see them. In those darkest moments, there are reasons to praise God...we simply have to have our eyes open and looking! Even if everything else truly seems to be a total loss, we must remember the words of Paul and Peter concerning our ability to go to God in prayer, pouring our hearts out before Him and making requests for His strength in times of difficulty and struggle.

"Don't worry about anything, but in everything, through prayer and petition with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus." (Philippians 4:6,7)

"Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt you at the proper time, casting all your cares on him, because he cares about you." (1 Peter 5:6,7)

B. Recognizing those blessings will fill us with great joy & confidence.

1. Even just utilizing the blessing of prayer ought to serve us greatly by allowing those worries, concerns, anxieties, pains, and other negatives to be lifted off of our shoulders. We will be surprised what the Lord has done. We will feel the doubts fly away from us. We will be filled with a song within our hearts! We will gain strength and comfort from God that will carry us all the way to the end of this life if we will continually seek Him.
2. Now, this doesn't mean that they will disappear never to be seen again, but it means that we know there is someone so much mightier than we are that is there strengthening us to be able to cope with the struggles we are facing. I don't know about you, but it gives me such joy to know that God cares for me and that He desires to strengthen me when I am being beat down by the storms of life. He will not leave me, nor forsake me in my greatest times of need if I will humble myself before Him. He will give me peace in the storm.
3. Further, if I know that He is with me through everything I face in life, then it ought to fill me with greater confidence to keep on doing exactly as I ought to be doing in my faith. No matter the difficulties I face, I must recognize that those things are not God's will for me. He desires that I conquer this life by leaning upon Him for strength and recognizing that I can't do it without Him! I must humble myself if I want to experience the great joy and confidence that comes by trusting in God alone. I am nothing, but He is everything. He is the One that sets my feet on a rock, makes my steps secure, and puts a new song in my mouth. **(Psalm 40:2,3)**

I want to close these thoughts by considering the final few verses of **Psalm 40**.

(v.14) *Let those who intend to take my life be disgraced and confounded. Let those who wish me harm be turned back and humiliated.*

(v.15) *Let those who say to me, "Aha, aha!" be appalled because of their shame.*

(v.16) *Let all who seek You rejoice and be glad in You; let those who love Your salvation continually say, "The Lord is great!"*

(v.17) *I am oppressed and needy; may the Lord think of me. You are my Helper and my Deliverer; my God, do not delay.*

As David writes this Psalm, I can't help but imagine Him writing these words with full confidence that these words are all so very true. He was a man that knew His God was mighty and faithful to bless those who seek to serve Him in all things. It is my hope that we too will be able to look at those things around us that seek to harm and humiliate us and remember that they are nothing compared to our God. Sometimes we fail to remember this in the midst of our struggles, but I hope that this lesson has reminded us all to be ever faithful to count our blessings and see all the good that the Lord has done in our lives as His people who are seeking to serve Him in all that we do.