

“Struggling with Inadequacy”

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Text: Psalm 139

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Two cows standing by a fence watched a milk truck go by. The sign on the side of the truck declared, “ultra-homogenized, micro-filtered and pasteurized, 98% reduced fat and vitamin D fortified milk.” One cow said to the other, “makes you feel kind of inadequate, doesn’t it?” These cows are not alone. Feelings of inadequacy in life are pervasive. It’s a safe guess that almost all of us have struggled with these feelings at some time in our lives. And these feelings hurt. As the philosopher William James put it, “the subtlest forms of suffering known to man are connected with the poisonous humiliations that are a consequence of feeling inadequate.”

We live in a society that is constantly pummeling us with the message that we are not adequate. Channel surf television with a watchful eye, you will get this message time and again. Apparently I need Rogaine to restore my hair, cool laser body sculpting to get rid of excess fat, that I can’t make trendy fashion choices without GOOP, I need a certain gravy so I can be known as the perfect parent, and Dr. Oz to tell me how best to maintain my health. It’s a wonder we don’t come away feeling depressed after watching television. We are bombarded with the message that “if you don’t make this change or use this product, you are not complete”.

Now, to be fair, the world is not ganging up on us to create those feelings of inadequacy. The human psyche, generally, is prone to fall into its pit. Feelings such as envy, jealousy and insecurity can be tightly woven into feelings of inadequacy. The most successful Olympic competitor in history—Michael Phelps—in an interview this year talked about his own struggles with inadequacy that fostered depression in him and contemplating suicide. He struggled with these demons for years...which we can find odd because we consider Phelps one of the most successful athletes in history.

It can be a part of a person’s worklife as well. The screenwriter William Goldman passed away recently. He once wrote of his own struggles with feelings of inadequacy. “Writing” he said, “is finally about one thing: going into a room alone and doing it. Putting words on paper that have never been there in quite that way before. And although you are physically by yourself, the haunting Demon never leaves you... that Demon being the knowledge of your own terrible limitations, your hopeless inadequacy, the impossibility of never getting it right”. Revealing honesty from a man who struggled at times to fulfill his profession. And this from the man who brought us such movies as “Butch Cassidy”, “All The President’s Men”, “A Bridge Too Far” and my favourite, “The Princess Bride”. Any of us at work can have that question rise up in the back of our head, “Can I do this?”

But it's not just about the flippant promotions of the advertising world or our performance anxieties. Feelings of inadequacy are also bedfellows with our most noble aspirations. What parent has not chastised themselves at times for their shortcomings in parenting skill? The fact that we can have and should have noble aspirations for our life (like being a wonderful parent) means that at times we will feel inadequate. It can happen even in faith. Any of us can feel like the centurion who went to Jesus to ask him to heal his paralyzed servant. While he had a real need he wanted to take to Jesus – a charitable concern for a person in need – still he found himself saying, “Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof” (Matt. 8:8).

Here is our first comfort. God knows this about me, and you, about every human being. Each of us feels inadequate at times. And yet, in knowing this, still God comes to us with accepting love. Remember the stories of Jesus: the woman at the well who had had five husbands, John the Baptist who questioned whether his cousin Jesus was the Messiah, the woman caught in adultery who was to be stoned, Peter after his betrayal of his master on Good Friday, Judas whom Jesus travelled with for three years. And that's just a few.

Psalm 139 drives this point home with graphic detail. “O Lord, you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up. You discern my thoughts from far away... You are acquainted with all my ways” (vs. 1-3). In other words: God knows all that I do, God knows all that I think. God knows what I feel inadequate about. David, the author, writes “Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, You know it completely”. David goes on to say that God's knowledge of us is inescapable. He wrote, “Where can I go from Your Spirit? Where can I flee from Your presence? If I ascend to Heaven, You are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, You are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, you are there. I can think ‘surely the darkness will hide me’, but I know that darkness is as light to You” (7 – 12). We are that naked before God. God knows the things we feel inadequate about. Yet how does God respond to us? David writes in verse 9, “If I take the wings of the morning, and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there Your hand shall lead me, even there your right hand shall hold me fast”. “You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me”. Images of acceptance, assurance, security, care. God takes us as we are, and loves us, even despite the things we feel inadequate about.

But there is another word here in this psalm that can ease the grip of those feelings of inadequacy. Like it or not, we have been built this way. David wrote that God knows us intimately, and that there is no escaping His knowledge. But then David also wrote: but I am who You've made me. Starting in verse 13: “It was You who formed my inward parts and knit me together in my mother's womb. Your eyes beheld my unformed substance. In Your book were written all the days of my life that were formed for me, even before any of them existed”. It's not just that God knows those things that we feel inadequate about, but God has allowed imperfection to be a part of our humanity. By our nature we will have

shortcomings, failures, anxieties. Which means we too need to learn to accept what we believe are our shortcomings. Jesus asked the expert of the Jewish law to summarize all the Law. The second summary he gave was this, "And love your neighbour as yourself". It is the back half of that law we need to remember. Loving ourselves means becoming more content with our imperfect nature. As Popeye often wisely said, "I yam what I yam".

But David was not willing to leave it there. He did not end the psalm saying, "so I'm OK, and you're OK". This understanding of God prompted in David a yearning for transformation. His new understanding built a different kind of foundation for change. And he explained that foundation in this psalm. God's intimate knowledge of us is humbling for us. Hearing from the psalmist that God appreciates that to be human is to be imperfect is, frankly, a bit of a relief to know. But here is what David also appreciated: to be known this intimately by God gives us the personal freedom to look at ourselves just as intimately. If God can lovingly accept us with our inadequacies, then we can deal with our own sense of inadequacy with self-acceptance and love. This is helpful, but even here David went a step further. David, now knowing God's intimate knowledge of him, God's acceptance of him, wanted to jump deep into that... and there to know God's help to change. "Search me, O God" is David's prayer at the end of the psalm. "Know my heart!". He's saying, You know me intimately – so come in and help me know myself intimately. He goes on to say "help me". While self-acceptance is an important thing that can release the grip of feelings of inadequacy, David frankly recognized that some of our inadequacies may be things we need to correct. He put it this way in the psalm, "Test me, and know my thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in me, and (then) lead me in the way everlasting". He was saying, help me know what you know about me, O God, help me see clearly where I can step up and be a better person for you....then lead me out. If I need to be more kind to others, O God: help me be more kind. If I need to grow more into you, O God: help me do this. God can help us through them. It's not self-help. It's God's help.