

SUFFERING FROM A.S.P.?

We live in a world of acronyms. As long as you're an insider, as long as you know what the acronym stands for, it's easier. It's a whole lot easier to complain about the long lines at the DMV than it is to speak about the Department of Motor Vehicles. That preference for acronyms is particularly true in certain fields. Talk to someone who has served in the military, put that person on the clock, and he could probably rattle off 25 acronyms in a minute. In a late 1980's movie called "Good Morning, Vietnam," actor Robin William's character makes fun of the military's penchant for acronyms. After hearing his immediate superior use a couple of acronyms talking about Vice-President Nixon's press conference, Robin William's character responds: "Seeing as how the VP is such a VIP, shouldn't we keep the PC on the QT, because if it leaks to the VC, you could end up MIA, and then we'd all be put on KP." It's not just the military that loves acronyms. The visible church does, too. When our Synod (the WELS) gathers in convention, delegates hear reports from the BHM, BWM, BME, SC, and COP.

But the military and the visible church don't even come close to the medical field. There's an acronym for just about everything. Good thing, too. It's easier to speak about COPD than *chronic obstructive pulmonary disease*. It's definitely easier to say ALS than *amyotrophic lateral sclerosis*. This morning we're going to take a page from the medical field and talk about a serious disease. It's called ASP and it afflicts many. Unfortunately, most of those who have contracted ASP are completely unaware of their condition. We want to identify, as we study Haggai 1, the symptoms of ASP, the prognosis for those who have ASP, and the treatment for ASP.

Let's keep in mind the situation in which the prophet Haggai served. We'll use the year 520BC as the time of this prophecy. The people of Judah had returned from seventy years of captivity in Babylon in 535BC. Never before had a nation returned from captivity, but that statistic was irrelevant because the Lord was involved.

The Lord gave his people one simple instruction upon their return to the land of Judah: rebuild the temple. The Babylonians had pillaged the temple, taking from it all the gold and silver and all the precious stones. Then they burned it to the ground. The Lord said, "Rebuild that temple." It wasn't for

him. He didn't need a place to stay when he visited Jerusalem; he didn't need a place in which to hang out. But the people needed it. They needed the temple as the place where the Lord would, through the regular sacrifices, teach them about the sacrifice to come, the sacrifice of the Lamb of God that would take away the sin of the world. They needed the temple as the place of the Lord's special presence with his people.

The people of Judah agreed with that wise instruction and began to rebuild the temple immediately. But then they began to face some resistance. Some of the people in neighboring areas conspired against them. They lied about the people of Judah to the king of Persia, suggesting that the Jews were plotting a rebellion. The people of Judah then decided, "You know what? It's just not worth it. This persecution we're facing is a sign that we shouldn't be engaged in this project, at least not right now. We can always pick it up later. We'll do it when there's peace in the land, when things are going well for us and our families, and when we have the funds in our pockets to do this right – to build the kind of temple that we really ought to build."

Sounds like a reasonable, logical plan, does it not? Just put it off for a while, not forever, but until a more suitable time. That's actually the primary symptom of ASP. It's putting aside something good and useful and necessary, with the promise of addressing it later, when life's a little easier and less stressful.

You can probably guess what happened. They decided to hold off on rebuilding the temple temporarily. And fifteen years passed with nothing being done. It wasn't that they sat around for those fifteen years watching the grass grow. Not at all. They turned their attention and energy elsewhere. The Lord asked his people who didn't think it was time to rebuild the temple this searching question in verse 4: "*Is it time for you yourselves to be living in your paneled houses, while this house remains a ruin?*" The people had spared no time or expense in building their own homes. They had time to pursue the good life, but no time to build the temple. No time to care for their souls or the souls of others. No time to be built up in faith. That's ASP in a nutshell: procrastinating in spiritual matters, but pursuing "the good life" with great vigor and enthusiasm.

From the perspective of the people of Judah, everything was fine. That's the big problem with ASP – the people who have it don't recognize it. They assume that the disease could only strike others. But the Lord knew the truth. His people were suffering from ASP. Out of love for their souls, he tried to lead them to recognize the problem. Look at verse 5: *"Give careful thought to your ways. You have planted much, but have harvested little. You eat, but never have enough. You drink, but never have your fill. You put on clothes, but are not warm. You earn wages, only to put them in a purse with holes in it."* The people had worked hard, but had little to show for it. They had pursued the good life with extraordinary energy, but the good life hadn't materialized. The Lord wanted them to think about it seriously – "Why hasn't your pursuit of the good life yielded the good life?"

Later he gave them the answer. Look at verses 9 to 11. *"You expected much, but see it turned out to be little. What you brought home, I blew away. Why?" declares the Lord Almighty. 'Because of my house, which remains a ruin, while each of you is busy with his own house. Therefore, because of you the heavens have withheld their dew and the earth its crops. I called for a drought on the fields and the mountains, on the grain, the new wine, the oil and whatever the ground produces, on men and cattle, and on the labor of your hands.'"* Their problem was their ASP. Because they had procrastinated spiritually, putting aside for a later time the important matter of building the Lord's temple, the Lord had taken away his blessing.

Have you figured out the disease? ASP is Acute Spiritual Procrastination. People with ASP support the building of God's house. They don't speak against it in any way; they're all for it. They recognize that God's Word is important. They agree that it's good and wise to study the Word; it's good and wise to turn to the Lord in prayer; it's good and wise to give offerings to support the spread of the gospel; it's good and wise to be in God's house with God's people. And they fully intend to do all of those things . . . when life settles down for them, when their children aren't involved in so many different activities (some of which fall on Sunday mornings), when they've reached their career goals, when they've earned enough to take a step back from the rat race, when they reach retirement (or perhaps later in retirement, after they've done the traveling they've always intended to do), when they're close to death.

Are you suffering from Acute Spiritual Procrastination? Are you putting off until tomorrow the building of the Lord's house? If you do not carve out time each day to read and meditate on God's

Word, because you have so much to do at work or home or with your family, you have ASP. Praying only occasionally, when there's some urgent matter, but otherwise refraining because of the press of other responsibilities is a symptom of ASP. Not supporting the spread of the gospel of Christ with firstfruit offerings because you have too many expenses already reveals the disease. All with the thought of "I'll do it eventually, when life settles down, when I've reached my goals. That failing, I'll do it when I get old."

When the Lord tells us to meditate on his Word and receive his Sacrament, it's not for his benefit, but ours. If you and I don't regularly listen to his Word, we will revert to the idea with which we were born. We will go back to believing that we can have eternal life with God by obeying his commands and being good people. Those who believe that end up separated from God forever in hell, no matter how nice they were to others. There are a lot of nice people in hell. If you think that you can wait until later to address the needs of your soul, think again. You heard what Jesus said in the Holy Gospel. He will come like a thief in the night and those who were not prepared, because they were too busy with life to be instructed by the Word, will be condemned. ASP is terminal. That's the prognosis for those who procrastinate spiritually, who wait for life to settle down to meditate on God's Word. They will die. Not just physically, but eternally, in hell.

You can't go to the drug store to pick up a prescription. There's no ointment to be applied and no medicine to take. There is no treatment available from men. But there is a treatment from God.

God's treatment of our ASP is Jesus. What you deserved, Jesus received. He who should have lived in honor instead died in dishonor because he was covered with your sin. The One who regularly retreated to quiet places to reflect on God's Word and communicate with his Father traded his obedience for your transgression. When he suffered the Father's wrath on Calvary's cross, he paid the whole price. And he gave you the very righteousness you need to stand before the Father. It's that message of the Father's great love for undeserving sinners that is at the heart of Scripture. That's why the Lord so wants us to read and hear that Word, because he wants us to know him as the One who loves us.

The Lord may well do in your situation what he did with the people of Judah. He may, out of love for your soul, allow or send trials so that you recognize what is eternally valuable and you learn not to pursue treasures that do not last. Doesn't that help us to respond to troubles differently than we would

normally? If my nice new car gets totaled or my computer blows up or my beloved furniture falls apart, I can give thanks for the reminder of where my treasure truly is.

The treatment for Acute Spiritual Procrastination isn't a one-time event. You need treatment for it every day. It requires daily repentance. Crucify your Old Adam by confessing your thorough sinfulness and your utter inability to be what God wants you to be or to do what God wants you to do. Don't offer any mitigating excuses or circumstances. Just throw yourself on the Lord's mercy. Then listen to his Word of promise, that he has forgiven your every sin in Christ. Listen as he promises not to hold your repeated rebellion against you. He never lies or deceives; what he promises, he does.

The Lord called the people of Judah to repentance. He called them to a change of mind and heart, about the importance of his Word in their lives. Look at what he says in verses 7 and 8: *"Give careful thought to your ways. Go up into the mountains and bring down timber and build the house, so that I may take pleasure in it and be honored," says the Lord.*" One of the reasons that the people offered for delaying the rebuilding of the temple was that they didn't have the financial wherewithal to do it right – to get cedars from Lebanon like Solomon had used. The Lord rejects that argument and says, "Just use the local lumber. I will be pleased with that. I will be honored by your repentance. I will be honored as you see me as the One who loves you in spite of your sin and rescues you from the punishment you deserve."

The change of mind and heart showed itself in a change of action. The people who had been busy with their own homes, who thought that there would always be time later to build the temple, changed. They started to build the temple. Verse 12 tells us that *"the whole remnant of the people obeyed the voice of the Lord their God and the message of the prophet Haggai, because the Lord their God had sent him. And the people feared the Lord."* Instead of placing their idea above the Lord's, they placed themselves under his Word. If he wanted them to build the temple, then nothing could be more important. Then everything else could fall into second place behind that priority.

This is what the Lord desires to see in you: fruits of repentance. Where there is a change of mind, there is to be a change in action. That means making it a priority to be in God's house, and not just to be here, but to listen carefully. That means focusing, even though there are many weighty things on your mind and difficulties in your life. That means spending time each day with a portion of Scripture, even if you can't see an immediate application to your life or you don't feel any different afterwards.

Talk about a tall order! That's it, right there. It's more than we can do. It's not more, however, than what the Lord can do. The Lord who calls his people to a life of repentance works that repentance in them. You heard that in verses 13 and 14: *"Then Haggai, the Lord's messenger, gave this message of the Lord to the people: 'I am with you,' declares the Lord. So the Lord stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and the spirit of Joshua, son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and the spirit of the whole remnant of the people. They came and all began to work on the house of the Lord Almighty, their God."* It was the Lord who stirred up the spirits of his people. They didn't have to stir up their own spirits. They couldn't. But notice how the Lord did that. Through his Word. Through his promise, in this instance, "I am with you."

That's the Lord's promise to you as well, as you fight the ASP that goes with having a sinful flesh and living in a sinful world. The Lord is with you. He will, as you hear his Word and carefully reflect on it, lead you to a life of repentance. He doesn't ask you to "go it alone" or "do it by yourself." He is with you, not just to observe, but to work and to equip. He will empower you to do what he commands.

Acute Spiritual Procrastination is deadly. Denying that you have it or are prone to it will not help you at all. Acknowledge it. Don't try to treat it yourself. Let the Lord treat it through his Word. Day after day, listen to him as he points out your sinfulness. Listen to him as he speaks of the Savior who lived and died in your place. And when you find yourself lamenting the fact that you so often suffer from this horrible disease that stops you from serving him the way you wish, remember the Lord's promise. He is coming again on the Last Day to raise you from the dead. He will free you from your weakness forever and you will serve him perfectly.