

HALLELUJAH

Week #1 of a 6-Week "Songs of Life" Series

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Sunday, Oct. 13, 2024

Today, we are starting a six-week version of our "Songs of Life" series, where I take famous songs -- songs we know; songs we love -- and extract a spiritual message from them to help us live our lives more fully, more lovingly and more joyously. Today, we begin with a song, "Hallelujah," written by fellow Canadian, Leonard Cohen. It was written in 1984 and made famous by Katie Lang, and it was in the movie *Shrek*, I believe.

The word "Hallelujah" is such a positive, uplifting word. It means "praise God": Hallelujah; praise God. It is a joyful, sincere expression of our love of God. Praise God; hallelujah.

Say Hallelujah: [with congregation] "*Hallelujah!*"

And now just whisper the words: [with congregation]: "*Hallelujah.*"

Take a deep breath. It is a powerful word: Hallelujah. It's a sacred word: Hallelujah. What's interesting, though, is that this song, you know is kind of a solemn song and a heavy song. Yet, it is a hopeful song and an optimistic song. Many people don't realize what the content is, but the content really comes from the Bible. And it's the story of David and his affair with Bathsheba, and Samson and Delilah.

And so, it is about the two of them, because they both gave in to their human weakness. They gave in to temptation. David, having this affair, used his power as king and sent her husband to war and he was killed so he could marry her. You know, Samson gave away his secret to Delilah. She cut his hair; he lost his power; he was blinded; and he was enslaved.

Both of them, you know, had a struggle with their spiritual side and their human side and their human desires. And they made some bad decisions. They betrayed the responsibilities and their spiritual duties and spiritual call. And they allowed the dark side of humanity to take over their Hallelujah: their spiritual side.

And interestingly, Cohen wanted to juxtapose holiness with the frailty of humanity; of sacredness, and the power of our spirituality. And so, it was an interesting balance between the two of them. He wrote it, not with the idea of having people think a particular thing, but to find their own meaning in their own individual human struggle and spiritual struggle. And to find out for themselves their own experience of what Hallelujah means.

And today, I'm going to share with you three life lessons and a spiritual message from the song, "Hallelujah."

So the first one, I think, is to **HONOR OUR HUMAN STRUGGLE**. How many people here ever struggled in an area of your life? Anybody ever struggled? [Congregation laughs] How many people here have ever messed up big? Anybody ever made any really bad decisions? Anybody? And, last one: How many people have ever felt your humanness or weakness? Feeling powerless and having a lot of self-doubt?

You know, Jesus said, "*In this life there will be trials and tribulations, but be of good cheer, for I have overcome the world.*" I think this song shows Jesus' statements that affirms that struggles are an integral part of our human existence and of our spiritual path. We all have struggles of many kinds and for many reasons ... You know, struggles from our own mistakes, but troubles from heartaches; from losses; from family conflict; from financial problems; from feeling a sense that we don't have any direction or purpose; or the struggle of working hard and feeling like we're not getting anywhere or achieving our goals.

Interestingly, Leonard Cohen struggled for five years writing this song! He had his struggles, because he was trying to show how connected our human and our spiritual life are, and how they are related in that process.

You know, M. Scott Peck, who wrote the book, *The Road Less Traveled*, said this. He said, "*Life is difficult. That is a great truth: one of the greatest truths. It is a great truth because, once we truly see this truth, we transcend it. Once we truly know that life is difficult -- once we truly understand and accept it -- then life is no longer difficult.*" I agree with that, except the last line I didn't agree with so much -- [Congregants laugh] -- you know, when we realize and accept it, then life is no longer difficult. I think we sometimes make our lives more difficult than it needs to be ...

But I believe that life is tough. Relationships are tough. Overcoming challenges and difficulties is tough. Life is not easy, but struggle is a vital and important part of our spiritual growth; it is a vital part of our learning, our discovering, our expanding, and our awakening and our becoming the fullness of who we came here to be. And we are not alone in our suffering; we're on the same boat. We're all on the same spiritual path and journey towards knowing the fullness of who we are, you know. But it is not easy!

When I was in second-year seminary, I hit a wall where I just didn't know what I believed. I didn't know if I wanted to be a minister. I didn't know if to drop out of school. I was really struggling. I kept wondering, "*What is wrong with me?!? How come ... I used to believe this? Why am I having such a hard time now?*" And I was just really, really struggling.

And a few months later, I read an article by Mother Teresa that said that Mother Teresa wondered if God really existed; wondered if she was doing the right thing; and wondered if she should be doing something else! Mother Teresa: the saint! Mother Teresa, who won the Nobel Prize. Mother Teresa, who was known for her love and compassion for all humanity. Mother Teresa -- who served in India for 17 years -- had struggles with her own faith; with her own belief; with her own humanity!

I read that and I was so happy. [Congregants laugh] I was so relieved to know it was okay for me to have struggles on this journey in this life, even in the very path where I felt that I was called. And what I was able to do was just to relax and to accept the fact that I'm struggling. And to not beat myself up for not having it all together and to just trust life. Trust that I will be shown and guided when I need to for the fulfillment of the life that I came here to live.

So where in your life are you struggling? And are you willing to accept the fact that struggling is just a part of life? Are you willing to relax and let go and just trust life? Trust yourself? Trust the process? That you will be led to where you need to be?

And it's important for us to honor our struggle ... not to dwell on it and be immersed in it and get lost in it, but to honor it in a sense that we need to move through it consciously. To move through it with awareness and to move through it with acceptance.

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, the French priest, said, "*We are not human beings having a spiritual experience. We are spiritual beings having a human experience.*" How many people agree with that?

You know, the fact is: we are powerful, amazing spiritual beings. It says in Scripture, God has given us a spirit of power, love and self-discipline. We are amazing spiritual beings! However, we hold ourselves back. And one of the main ways we do it is: we have a tendency to want to avoid struggle. A tendency to want to avoid the hard stuff and the difficult stuff in life. We would rather not face this. We would do anything to avoid struggle.

Let me give you an example. How many people here have ever avoided accepting full responsibility for your life? How many people have ever avoided conflict? Anybody? Anybody ever avoid being honest

because you didn't want to hurt somebody's feelings? How many people ever avoided dealing with your own pain and woundedness, because you just it was too painful to go there? You know, how many people have ever avoided doing something because of fear? I mean, we even avoid good stuff! How many people have ever avoided exercising or eating a healthy diet? [Laughs with congregation]

It is amazing how we avoid! We cause ourselves pain and absolute struggle, because we don't honor struggle. We don't want struggle. We just want to pray it away. We hope it disappears as fast as humanly possible. We are spiritual beings, but sometimes the way we act is that we're spiritual beings trying to avoid a human experience, rather than to actually have one.

So, to honor our struggle means for us to face our lives; to face our mistakes; to face our losses and our challenges. And whatever is going on, it is to embrace our imperfection. It is to accept responsibility for our growth. And it is to trust life and trust the process and journey we're on ... that it will unfold for us in the greatest way possible.

You know, to honor our struggle, we should say, "*Hallelujah.*"

Say, "*Hallelujah.*" [Congregation: "*Hallelujah!*"]

The second one this teaches us is to **FIND OUR SPIRITUAL BALANCE**. How many people ever felt your life's a little out of balance? Anybody could use a little more balance in your life? You know, I think many of us are out of balance a lot. We work too much, but don't put enough effort on our health and our self-care. Sometimes we socialize too much and do not spend enough time maybe on our relationship. You know, sometimes we are so busy that we don't spend enough time in the silence and in the quietness, and tending to and nurturing our spiritual needs.

In 1 Corinthians, when it says, "*If you have all understanding of all mysteries and all knowledge, but have not love, you have nothing.*" It's a strong passage about love, but I think it's also about balance. There's nothing wrong with knowledge! There's nothing wrong with understanding! But if you have too much of that, and not enough love, or too much focus in one area and not enough on our spiritual, that we will be out of balance. And that's what the warning is.

You know, Scripture says that, "*False balance is an abomination.*" You know, that it's important for us to live well-balanced life. Because when we're out of balance, we tend to be exhausted. When we're out of balance, we tend to head for burnout. And when we are heading for burnout, we tend to miss out, you know, on so many good and positive things. Because we don't make the best decisions when we're burnt out. We make decisions that are convenient or easy, or based on power or money or sex, or what's going to make us look the best, rather than what's within our spiritual awareness and following divine wisdom to lead us to our highest and best.

I think this song invites us to seek harmony and inner peace, even in life's chaos. To seek inner balance -- to seek spiritual balance -- even when things are not going the way that we hoped. And the greatest way to find spiritual balance in our life is to put God first, and everything else will fall into place. It is to take time to develop a level of discipline and spiritual practices that will help us stay grounded; that help us stay more centered; to help us stay more connected; that immerses ourselves in the quiet and in the silence.

You know, one of the best versions of this is Emmett Fox. He wrote a pamphlet called "The Golden Key," and he said Whatever issue or problem "is going on in your life -- if it's a health issue, a legal issue, a work issue, a family issue, a financial issue -- the answer always is the golden key, which is to think about God. To think about God, he says, is the answer to all of our problems in life.

And when we're out of balance in our life, you know, I would say ... You'll never hear somebody say, "I'm out of balance. I'm just praying so much, I don't have enough time for work!" [Congregants laugh] Nobody says that! Anytime we hear "out of balance," 100% I'm going to guarantee you, it's because we're not taking quiet time. We're not meditating. You know, we're not listening to God. We're not tuning in to our divine self.

Finding spiritual balance is about taking time -- giving our attention -- to listen, to be still, and to make it a significant part of our lives. To make it an absolute priority. I love that Deepak Chopra line. He says, "*If you don't have enough time to pray once a day, pray twice a day.*" And what he's trying to say there is to make it a priority. You would have time, not only for one; you'd have time to pray twice a day if you were committed ... If you were dedicated to spiritual balance and being spiritually grounded and spiritually centered, we would have the time.

When [Scripture] says, "*Be transformed by the renewing of our minds,*" it's because our minds need renewing on a regular basis. Jesus prayed consistently -- multiple times a day -- to keep connecting, connecting, connecting, connecting; grounding, grounding, grounding; centering, centering, centering in Spirit. Because, even back then -- with a pedestrian, slow-paced life -- he prayed pretty consistently and regularly. Could you imagine, with our fast-paced life, how often we should be praying now? We should be praying every hour. Every half hour!

We need to immerse our minds to find that spiritual balance. Because we tend to stay more calm; more centered; we get less flustered by things that may not go our way. And what happens: the more grounded we are and balanced spiritually, the more of our spirit -- the more of the divine love within us and peace and joy -- begins to flow in and through us, and in and through all that we do.

Our minds are going to wander; we're going to forget. We just have to keep bringing it back; keep bringing it back; keep bringing it back. You know, I bet we all wish we could do one really solid sincere prayer and have it last us a couple of weeks, you know. [Congregants laugh] But that isn't he way it works! It's about consistent practice, consistent practice. That's how you find that balance.

I love that Buddhist saying! It says, "*It doesn't matter how many times you forget; it's how many times you remember.*" It doesn't matter how many times your mind drifts off; it's how many times you bring it back. Keep bringing it back; keep bringing it back. That's how we find spiritual balance.

And when we find spiritual balance, we should say, "*Hallelujah.*"

Say, "*Hallelujah.*" [Congregation: "*Hallelujah!*"]

Okay! And the last message from this song, I think, is to **REDEEM OURSELVES**. And the power of redemption. I think the most powerful message in this song illustrates the power of "Hallelujah" in redeeming ourselves from when we make mistakes; redeeming mistakes for when we've allowed ourselves to drop the quality and standard about how we show up in our lives, in our relationships and in our work.

Here's the words in one of the choruses; it says:

***Even though it all went wrong,
I'll stand before the Lord of song
With nothing on my tongue but hallelujah.***

And what it is saying is: even in the darkest moments, redemption is available to all of us. Even in the darkest moments, we can say, "*Hallelujah.*" We can say, "*Praise God!*" We can have a sincere heart that is seeking to connect and celebrate with the living Spirit of God.

You know, David was redeemed. Even with all he did, he confessed to God. He asked God for forgiveness and for mercy. And he went on to do things and be a great king. And he and Bathsheba, they lost their first baby. The second child she gave birth to was Solomon, who became the next king.

You know, here's the three things we need to redeem ourselves. The first one is to **rise up to the Christ mind and the Christ Spirit that is in ourselves.** In Colossians it says, "*Christ in you, your hope of glory.*" And "Christ in you" means the love of God in you; the Spirit of God in you; and the spirit of redemption in you, which is our hope of glory. That it is within us, and we need to awaken to it and to rise to believe that that is the truth of who we are.

The second thing with the redemption is self-forgiveness: that we have to **be willing to forgive ourselves.** I know people who said, "*I will never forgive myself for doing that or making that mistake.*" We need to be willing to let go of our grievances and our grudges, and especially our self-blame and our hatred or our anger towards ourselves, or our level of guilt. We must be willing to forgive: to forgive ourselves.

And we need to just give it to God! Sometimes we think we need to know how to forgive. You don't need to know how to forgive; you just need to be willing. Are you willing to forgive yourself completely?

And then the last one is to **make some new choices.** If we want a new life, we need to make some new choices. We need to make some new decisions. We need to head in some new directions. Because there is new love; there is new life; there are new opportunities; there are new experiences ... and there are also new jokes that can happen, too! [Congregants laugh and groan]

Here we go! [Congregants laugh]

A 68-year-old guy goes for his annual physical; gets incredible results. So, the doctor is so impressed; at 68, he's so healthy, especially for his age. And the doctor says, "*So how old was your father when he died?*"

And the guy said, "*Did I say my father was dead?*"

The doctor says, "*No, you didn't.*"

He says, "*Well, my father is 89 years old, and he's healthy; he's doing great! He still drives, he works part-time, and he goes to the gym four times a day.*"

The doctor is amazed! "*Eighty-nine; that's amazing!*" So he says, "*So how old was your grandfather when he died?*"

And the guy says, "*Did I say my grandfather was dead?*" [Congregants laugh] And he said, "*My grandfather is 112 years old, and he lives a full and active life. In fact, he's getting married next week.*" [Congregants laugh]

And the doctor says, "*Married? Why would he want to get married at 112?*"

And the man says, "*Did I say he wanted to get married?*" [Congregants laugh]

Alright. Redemption; it's a good thing. [Congregants laugh]

One of the things about this is each of these "Hallelujahs," to me, represent a celebration of something really powerful that we don't always realize that we are: and that is resilience. Our "Hallelujahs" are a celebration of our resilience: of our continued faith, with God, that no matter how many mistakes we make – no matter how things go wrong -- that we can come back and still say "Hallelujah." We can come back and still say, "Praise God."

You know, this song may sound heavy and talk about human frailties, but it is a true celebration of our resilience, our spiritual capacity, and our willingness and desire to praise God.

And when we honor our struggle; when we find our spiritual balance; and redeem ourselves, we will rise and we will be able to say, *"Hallelujah!"*

Say, *"Hallelujah!"* [Congregation: *"Hallelujah!"*]

Say it again: [with congregation] *"Hallelujah!"*

One more time: [with congregation] *"Hallelujah!"*

God bless you all.

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