

Psalm 54

“The Lord is the Upholder of My Life”

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Pentecost Season

Last summer I participated in a discussion where the question was asked - if you were stranded on deserted island and could only have two books of the Bible with you, one from the Old Testament, and one from the New Testament, what would you choose?

It's kind of a silly question, of course - that's not the way the Bible actually works, and certainly not the way it's intended to work (i.e. only reading one book in isolation of the others), but still, I put a few minutes thought into it.

For the new testament, I had to choose one of the gospels, and my favorite gospel, for a whole host of reasons, has always been John.

But when I came to the Old Testament, it wasn't even really a discussion. The one book I'd take with me to a deserted island would have to be the Psalms.

Martin Luther famously called the Psalms “The bible in miniature form,” by which he meant that the Psalms include, in essence, everything that the Bible teaches. And that is certainly true.

And of course, it is true that the psalms teach us to pray as God would have us pray - with boldness, with fervor, with unabashed confidence in his love and power.

But, for me, the psalms are more than that. The psalms teach us what it is to be human - and even more than that - what it means to be human in relationship to the God who created us.

You see, at the heart of the reason for your existence is that we would glorify God and enjoy him forever. Which means that at the heart of the Christian faith is irreducibly personal and emotional relationship between you and the Living God.

And nowhere is that personal, emotional connection between the human soul and God revealed to us anywhere more clearly than in the psalms.

The psalms teach us what it means to love God. What it means to fear God. What it means cry out to God in pain, in anger, in confusion. What it means to thank God. What it means to praise God. What it means to rest our restless hearts in God.

And for all these reasons, and many more, we return this summer to our normal practice of preaching consecutively through the psalter, picking up this morning in Psalm 54.

I invite you now to listen carefully to God's holy and inerrant word as it comes to us from Psalm 54, which is printed for you on the back of your order of worship.

Brief comment about the introductions sometimes given to individual psalms.

Psalm 54

To the choirmaster: with stringed instruments. A Maskil of David, when the Ziphites went and told Saul, "Is not David hiding among us?"

1 O God, save me by your name,
and vindicate me by your might.

2 O God, hear my prayer;
give ear to the words of my mouth.

3 *For strangers have risen against me;
ruthless men seek my life;
they do not set God before themselves. Selah*

4 *Behold, God is my helper;
the Lord is the upholder of my life.*

5 *He will return the evil to my enemies;
in your faithfulness put an end to them.*

6 *With a freewill offering I will sacrifice to you;
I will give thanks to your name, O LORD, for it is good.*

7 *For he has delivered me from every trouble,
and my eye has looked in triumph on my enemies.*

Thus far the reading of God's word. It is absolutely true, and it is given to you because your Father in Heaven loves you.

Blessed Lord, who caused all the holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear this portion of your word, and to read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest these words, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

The context of this psalm is crucial, of course. We heard already this morning a portion of the story in our first Old Testament reading.

David, at this point in his life, has been exiled from the court of Saul, the king of Israel.

Not too long ago, David was the most celebrated warrior in Israel. He had defeated the Philistines by killing Goliath in open battle. He had married the Michal, the daughter of Israel's king. He had entered into a covenant

with Jonathan, the king's son, and presumed heir. He had commanded the armies of Israel, with great effect in the field.

But all of that changed when Saul, under the influence of an evil spirit, began to suspect that David intended to take the throne for himself.

On the face of it, it wasn't a completely irrational fear. David had become more popular with the people than Saul. He was younger, he was strong, he fought in the front lines while Saul ruled from the back. He had gained the trust of Israel's military leaders, and made deep relational connections within Saul's own family.

It was a situation ripe for danger. And Saul was unable to resist the temptation that David's presence presented, and decided that in order for him to be happy and content and secure, David had to die.

So David ran. He didn't start a civil war, he didn't organize a military coup, he just left Saul's court and went into hiding. This is an important part of the story, because things could have happened differently. David could have resisted Saul's machinations with force and fulfilled his paranoia by seeking to claim the throne that had been promised to him by Samuel through force.

But David did the righteous thing in that situation, which was to run and hide and wait patiently for the Lord to vindicate him and keep his promises.

In 1 Samuel 23, while David is in hiding in the wilderness of Judah with a group of his followers, he hears that a nearby town, Keilah, is being attacked by the Philistines. At the Lord's instruction, he takes his men, defeats the Philistines, and then goes back to the wilderness to hide.

You would think that the Ziphites, the people who inhabited the land where David was hiding, would be positively disposed toward him. They,

like him, were part of the tribe of Judah. Many of them had probably cheered his previous victories fighting for Israel. And they had just witnessed David protecting one of their own towns from the Philistines.

But 1 Samuel 23 tells us that this was the response of the Ziphites to David's faithfulness.

19 Then the Ziphites went up to Saul at Gibeah, saying, "Is not David hiding among us in the strongholds at Horesh, on the hill of Hachilah, which is south of Jeshimon? 20 Now come down, O king, according to all your heart's desire to come down, and our part shall be to surrender him into the king's hand."

To put it bluntly, the Ziphites assessed the situation and decided, based on the prevailing political winds, to betray David to his greatest enemy.

They went, on their own initiative, to Saul, and not only told him, with exacting specificity, where David was hiding, they also offered to surrender David into his hands.

Although the Ziphites' plan was ultimately unsuccessful, the parallels between their betrayal of David and Judas' betrayal of Jesus are striking.

And it is in response to this situation that David writes Psalm 54.

And he begins like this. Verses 1-3:

*1 O God, save me by your name,
and vindicate me by your might.*

*2 O God, hear my prayer;
give ear to the words of my mouth.*

3 *For strangers have risen against me;
ruthless men seek my life;
they do not set God before themselves.*

Save me, David says. Vindicate me. Hear my prayer. Give ear to my words.

Notice that David doesn't work up to what he wants, he doesn't save it for the end, he doesn't butter God up before he tips his hand. He doesn't try to manipulate God or get some leverage over him.

No, David just jumps right in and asks God to save him, to vindicate him, to hear his prayer, to give ear to his words.

And then, in verse 3, he tells him why he needs what he needs - because wicked men have arisen against him and are seeking to put him to death.

David doesn't hold anything back. He just puts it on the table for God to hear and examine. He tells him, as honestly as he can, what it is that he needs, and why he needs it.

And David is teaching us something here. He's teaching us that there's a vulnerability to prayer that is essential to its nature.

There's a kind of simplicity, a kind lack of guile, a kind of defenseless and dependence - even, we might say, childishness, that we are invited into when we pray to our heavenly Father.

This is exactly what Jesus taught his disciples in the sermon on the Mount in Matthew when he told them: 7 *"And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. 8 Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.*

Beloved, don't be afraid to simply ask God for what you need in your prayers. He knows it already. Prayer is the act of acknowledging our fundamental neediness and placing our desires into the hands of God.

And often it's simple and as defenseless as saying things like: Save me, O God. Vindicate me. Hear my prayer. Give ear to the words of my mouth.

Then, in verses 4-5, David shifts his language. Having told God what he needs and why he needs it, he then seems to address himself - his own heart, his own soul - before working up to his next request - that God will judge his enemies.

*4 Behold, God is my helper;
the Lord is the upholder of my life.*

*5 He will return the evil to my enemies;
in your faithfulness put an end to them.*

God is my helper, David cries. The Lord is the upholder of my life!

In many ways, prayer is not only a conversation with God. It is also a conversation with ourselves, a dialogue with our own hearts.

In prayer, we exercise and examine our faith to remind ourselves of what we actually believe - not just what we believe about God in the abstract, but what we believe about his goodness and presence toward us in the specific details of our lives.

This crisis in David's life - which came about in the Lord's providence, of course - was an opportunity for him to test the strength of his faith - to discover, in this new situation of betrayal and desperation who it is that he actually believes God to be.

Calvin says that in this prayer, David commits himself to God in a new and thus far unprecedented way in his life experience.

And of course, this is certainly at least one of the reasons why God brings situations like what David found himself in into our lives - so that we can commit ourselves into the hands of God in a new way, in a deeper way, in a way that requires more faith than we had previously thought we possessed.

And it's not the difficult situation itself that brings about that work of stretching and expanding our faith. Prayer is essential piece as well, for it is prayer that we learn to say with our lips and, eventually, with our hearts: *"Behold, God is my helper; the Lord is the upholder of my life."*

David concludes the psalm by pledging to God his thanksgiving for a deliverance he has not yet experienced. He says:

*6 With a freewill offering I will sacrifice to you;
I will give thanks to your name, O LORD, for it is good.*

*7 For he has delivered me from every trouble,
and my eye has looked in triumph on my enemies.*

Remember that David writes this psalm not after his deliverance, but before.

Yes, God rescues him out of the hand of Saul in this circumstance and all future circumstances as well, but when David writes this psalm he's right in the middle of it.

David's mention here of a "freewill offering" is a particular sacrifice in the religious system of Israel.

It wasn't a blood offering to atone for sin. It was an offering you presented to God as a way of publicly and formally giving thanks for a specific kindness or act of deliverance that God had worked in your life - perhaps after the birth of a child, or after a recovery from illness.

But typically, of course, a freewill offering is something you decide to do *after* you experience the deliverance or the blessing that you're thanking God for.

When David writes this psalm and pledges this freewill offering he's exiled from the tabernacle. He can't even offer a sacrifice at the moment. He's out in the wilderness. And he doesn't even presently know exactly how the Lord is going to deliver his life. He hasn't even yet been saved.

And yet, David confidently says:

*6 With a freewill offering I will sacrifice to you;
I will give thanks to your name, O LORD, for it is good.*

In the midst of his trouble, David anticipates his future thanksgiving by faith.

And in verse 7, he is so confident of his coming deliverance by God's hand that he speaks of it in the past tense.

*7 For he has delivered me from every trouble,
and my eye has looked in triumph on my enemies.*

Do you see what David is doing here? He believes so firmly that God will be faithful, that God will protect him from Saul's persecution and the betrayal of the Ziphites that he speaks as though that deliverance and protection has already occurred.

And of course, one day that deliverance did come. God did thwart all of Saul's relentless designs on David's life, and one day Saul himself died at the hands of the Philistines. But none of that had yet happened when David wrote these words.

But here and now, in prayer, David reaches out into the future that he has not yet physically experienced and says - this is already true. My deliverance has already occurred.

It's the same kind of logic, the same kind of Christian thinking that compelled Paul to write to a bunch of Colossians who were still living and breathing and say: *"If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. And when Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory."*

Beloved, this is what prayer is.

Prayer is the artless and defenseless requesting of God of those things we need.

Prayer is the ongoing dialogue with our own souls where we articulate and learn, in every new challenge, that God is indeed the upholder of our lives.

And prayer is the place where we, by faith, reach into the eschatological future and learn to live and act and speak as though all of God's promises are already as real as if they had already happened.

This is the gift and grace of prayer - for in prayer we learn the great adventure of what it means fully to be a human person in relationship to the living God.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.