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SINGING IN THE CAVE

Psalm 57

by

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Lesson 13: Psalms

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Elizabeth Elliot lost her first husband, Jim Elliot, when he and four other men were martyred as they tried to take the gospel to the hostile Auca tribe. She lost her second husband, Addison Leitch, to cancer.

In an address to the Urbana Missions Conference (December, 1976) she told of being in Wales and watching a shepherd and his dog. The dog would herd the sheep up a ramp and into a tank of antiseptic in which they had to be bathed to protect them from parasites. As soon as they would come up out of the tank, the shepherd would grab the rams by the horns and fling them back into the tank and hold them under the antiseptic for a few more seconds. Mrs. Elliot asked the shepherd's wife if the sheep understood what was happening. "They haven't got a clue," she said.

Mrs. Elliot said, "I've had some experiences in my life that have made me feel very sympathetic to those poor rams--I couldn't figure out any reason for the treatment I was getting from the Shepherd I trusted. And He didn't give a hint of explanation."

If you've been a Christian for very long, you've been there. The Shepherd you trusted threw you into some circumstances that were quite unpleasant and you didn't have a clue as to why He was doing it. David had been there. In fact he wrote Psalm 57 out of the depths of just such an experience. When he was a teenager, David had been anointed as king to replace the disobedient King Saul. Then he slew the giant Goliath and was thrust into instant national fame. But King Saul's jealous rage sent David running for his life. He spent the better part of his twenties dodging Saul's repeated attempts on his life.

The title tells us that he wrote this psalm "when he fled from Saul, in the cave." Caves are interesting places to visit once in a while.

The lights show all the beautiful formations. But David didn't have electric lights. He was hiding, so he probably didn't even keep his torches burning.

Even with lights, I wouldn't want to live in a cave, especially if there was a hostile army outside seeking to kill me! If I were holed up in a cave, hiding from a madman and his army, and if God had promised me something that didn't seem to be coming true, about the last thing I would be doing would be writing praise songs. Yet, here is David, singing in the cave! And he's not singing the blues! He's exalting the Lord! He has something to teach us about how we are to think and act in those times when we're holed up in a cave, when God's promises don't seem true.

David must have wondered, "God, why are You allowing this to happen to me? You anointed me as king; I didn't choose the job. Why don't You remove Saul and put me in office?" But Psalm 57 shows us that David understood something deeper. Although, he may not have realized *why* God was allowing him to suffer, he did understand *what* God wanted from him in his suffering. David understood that to ask the question "Why?" in the midst of suffering is to ask the wrong question. The proper question to ask is, "God, *what* do You want from my life in the midst of this trial and as a result of this trial?" The answer is, "God wants to be glorified." That's the theme of Psalm 57 (note the refrain, verses 5 & 11):

God's glory should be our aim at all times,
but especially in a time of trial.

What does it mean to glorify God? The Hebrew word (*kabod*) has the idea of weight, heaviness, worthiness, reputation, honor. It was used of men to describe a man of substance or weight. We use it in a similar way when we say, "He's a heavyweight in his field." We mean, "This guy has substance; he must be reckoned with." When *kabod* was applied to God, it referred to His intrinsic worth. It means that God is worthy of all honor because of who He is, a God who is perfect in all of His attributes and ways. Thus to glorify God is to ascribe honor and praise to God for who He is and for what He has done. It means to show forth His

excellencies, to exalt Him. In more crude language, to glorify God means to make Him look good as He really is through my life.

The apostle Paul said, "Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God" (1 Cor. 10:31). He meant, "Let the promotion of God's glory or honor be your aim in all that you do. Strive in everything to act in such a way that others may praise and honor the God whom you profess to serve because they have seen His attributes shining through your life." That should be our aim at all times, but especially in a time of trial. How do we do that? David shows us two ways:

1. God is glorified as we trust Him in our trials (57:1-6).

Although the word "trust" doesn't occur in verses 1-6, it is the main idea. Trusting in the Lord has come to be viewed as a bit of nice, but totally useless, advice for someone who is in a trial. But it is *not* useless; it is some of the most practical and sound counsel we can follow when we're in a difficult situation. So we need to understand what it means to trust the Lord.

- A. Trust involves relying upon God alone (57:1).

David describes his trust as taking refuge in God. He uses the picture of baby chicks which take refuge under their mother's wings when a predator threatens them. They are entrusting their lives to their mother's protection. During the 1950's, when the cold war with Russia was at its peak and the threat of nuclear war seemed imminent, a number of Americans built bomb shelters in their backyards. Taking refuge in such a shelter implies complete trust on the part of the person going into it. He is entrusting his very life to those walls to protect him from death. In the same way, we are to take refuge in God. We are to entrust ourselves to Him, depending upon Him to protect us.

Relying upon God alone means that we consciously do not rely upon two things:

(1) We do not rely on human merit. "Be gracious to me, O God, be gracious to me." God's grace or mercy refers to His undeserved favor. It's one of the most difficult concepts for our proud hearts to grasp. I find that many who profess to know Christ do not understand the concept of God's grace. This is reflected in the fact that they try to come to God on the basis of their own goodness: "God, I've been extra good lately. I've read my Bible and gone to church and I even tithed this month. Now, here's what I want You to do" Or they ask, "Why this trial, God, when I've been so good?" They think God owes them something. That's not trusting in God alone. That's trusting in human merit. The only way to approach God is through grace.

(2) We do not rely on human means. Here David is, hiding in a cave. But he didn't see the cave as his refuge, but God. He saw beyond the cave to the Lord. The point is, David hid in the cave, but he didn't trust in the cave, but in the Lord.

You may think I'm quibbling over minutiae, but I contend that as American Christians, we are too heavily oriented toward methods. Hardly a week goes by without my receiving a flyer in the mail urging me to attend some seminar that is guaranteed to build my church. Some of the methods taught at these seminars are okay, while others are just slick business techniques applied to the church. As long as our methods are in harmony with Scripture, we are generally free to use them. But--and here is the crucial issue--we must be very careful *not* to trust in any method, but to rely on the Lord so that He gets the glory.

Also it needs to be pointed out that there are times when it is wrong to use any method, where we just need to wait on God to act on our behalf. On one occasion when David was being pursued by Saul, David and his men were in the inner part of a cave when Saul, not

knowing they were in there, went in the cave to “cover his feet” (i.e., sit on the toilet). David’s men said, “David, the Lord has delivered your enemy into your hand. Go kill him!” David crept up and quietly cut a small piece off Saul’s robe. Even at that his conscience bothered him. His men thought he was crazy. “Why didn’t you kill him? God delivered him into your hands and you just cut off a piece of his robe!”

But David said, “Far be it from me because of the Lord that I should do this thing to my lord, the Lord’s anointed ...” (1 Sam. 24:6). David trusted that the Lord would remove Saul without David’s help (Ps. 57:2-3). It would have been wrong in that situation for David to help God out by killing Saul, even though David knew that it was God’s will to depose Saul and give the throne to David.

When is it okay to use human means and when is it wrong? Search the Scriptures for examples. It is always wrong to *rely* on human means, and sometimes it is wrong even to use human means. Perhaps the real issue is, Who will get the glory if I use these human means? I would rather err on the side of going light on methods and heavy on trusting God. Then God gets the glory.

B. Trust involves going to God in prayer (57:1-2).

Prayer is the language of trust. This psalm is primarily a prayer. Prayer is an acknowledgment that our need is not partial, but total. Prayer says to God and to anyone else around, “I am a dependent person. I am not self-sufficient. I cannot handle this situation in my own strength, but only in Your strength, Lord!”

I heard Chuck Miller, a pastor, tell of an incident that happened while he was ministering in the Baltimore area. He had the opportunity to speak to the Orioles baseball team while they were in the playoffs against the Twins. He wanted to give the players a copy of a book he had

written, but he didn't have enough copies with him. One of the players who was a Christian told Chuck to drop the books off at the team office and he would see that the players received them.

By the time Chuck took the books to the office, the Orioles were in the World Series. Chuck prayed, "Lord, it would sure be great to get some World Series tickets for my boys." So he said to the secretary, "There wouldn't happen to be any series tickets available, would there?" She did some checking and managed to come up with three box seats, one for Chuck and each of his two boys.

At the dinner table that night, Chuck easily could have gotten the glory for himself: "Guess what your Dad managed to do today, kids?" Or, he could have given the glory to luck: "Wow, was I lucky today!" But instead, he wanted to teach his boys something about prayer, and so God got the glory. He said, "I was praying that God would provide some World Series tickets, and He did!" Trust means going to God in prayer and that way God gets the glory.

- C. Trust involves seeing God as greater than my problems (57:4-6).

David describes his situation in poetic language here. It's as though he is surrounded by lions or fire-breathing dragons or those whose teeth are spears and arrows, whose tongues are sharp swords. They're out to get David, he's outnumbered, and it just seems like a matter of time until he is caught in their net.

But right in the midst of enumerating his problems, you hit verse 5. It seems out of place. It would have fit at the end of verse 6 to close the stanza, after David's realization that his enemy's schemes would come back on them. But the verse jars you where it is. Why is it there?

I think that in the midst of his problems, David suddenly realizes that God is bigger than his problems! Trust is only as good as its object, and a trustworthy object inspires trust. But sometimes it takes intense trials to get us to look to the Lord and discover how trustworthy He is.

We see this illustrated in the history of Israel. When God brought them out of Egypt, Israel saw their problems as bigger than their God. God had just delivered them from Egypt by performing a series of stupendous miracles, culminating in the parting of the Red Sea. The next thing you read is that they went three days into the wilderness and found no water (Exod. 15:22). As you read that, you're inclined to say, "So what? The God who has done all these miracles can provide water!" But what did Israel do? They grumbled and complained, because they saw their problems as bigger than their God.

Later, when Moses sent the spies into the land, the majority report was, "It's a nice land, but there are giants there. We can't conquer it." And the people again complained and started looking for a leader to take them back to Egypt. They still saw their problems as bigger than their God. But Joshua and Caleb saw their God as bigger than their problems. They said, "Sure, there are giants; but the Lord is bigger than the giants. He will give us the land as He promised" (Num. 14:9).

The bigger your problem, the more opportunity there is for God to be glorified as you trust Him with the problem. Can you think of anything too difficult for the Lord? If you see God as bigger than your problems, then you can trust Him and He will get the glory. God is glorified as we trust Him in our trials. Trust involves relying on God alone; going to Him in prayer; and, seeing Him as bigger than our problems. But David shows us a second way God can be glorified in our trials:

2. God is glorified as we praise Him in our trials (57:7-11).

So far as we can tell, David is still in the cave. Saul is still the king, still after David. David's circumstances haven't changed much, if at all. And yet instead of self-pity and complaining, David breaks forth in praise to God. He teaches us two things about praise:

A. Praise is a matter of deliberate focus (57:7-9).

Praise is not our natural response in a time of trial. Our natural response is to complain and get angry at God, or to get depressed. But even though David's enemy had fixed a net to catch him (57:6), David had fixed his heart (57:7, same Hebrew root) to praise God. The repeated affirmations show that it was a matter of deliberate choice: "I will sing, yes, I will sing praises!"

Sometimes you need to praise God when you don't feel like it. You may think, "Isn't that hypocrisy?" No, it's obedience. Hypocrisy doesn't mean doing things you don't feel like doing. If that's what hypocrisy is, I'm a hypocrite every morning, because I get out of bed even though I don't feel like it! Hypocrisy is trying to present a false impression to others so that you look better than you are. But praising God is a matter of obedience, and the test of obedience isn't when you feel like obeying, but when you don't.

The next time you're going through a difficult trial and you're depressed or overwhelmed, follow David's lead and set your heart to praise God. Get out a hymn book or put on a praise tape and focus on the Lord by singing to Him.

B. Praise is a matter of testifying to others of God's goodness (57:9-10).

David wants the nations (those who don't know God) to hear his praise. Even though he's going through extreme difficulty, he wants to sing about how good God is, so

that others will hear and glorify God. David specifies two aspects of God's goodness (which often occur together in other psalms): His lovingkindness and His truth, or faithfulness (57:3, 10).

"Lovingkindness" comes from the Hebrew word related to the stork. The Hebrews saw the loyal love of the stork for its young and said, "God's love is like that, only greater." He cares for and nurtures us with never-ending love.

"Truth" points to God's faithfulness. He is consistent and trustworthy. He never fails His children. He may bring us into severe situations and sometimes even to premature death. But there is not a person in history who has trusted in the living God and been disappointed. Even those who have suffered greatly have testified to God's abundant love and faithfulness which has sustained them. Paul's desire as he was in prison, facing possible execution, should be ours, that "Christ shall even now, as always, be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death" (Phil. 1:20).

It is important that you focus your praise on God's loyal love and faithfulness in a time of trial, because it is precisely those qualities which Satan tempts you to doubt at such a time. You will be tempted to think, "If God loves me, why is this happening to me?" But David's voice comes singing from the cave, "God, Your lovingkindness is great to the heavens and Your truth to the clouds! Be exalted above the heavens, O God; let Your glory be above all the earth."

Conclusion

It's important not just that our individual worship, but also that our corporate worship be a vigorous testimony of God's glory. If someone who doesn't know God comes into our midst, he should be able to tell from our praise that we worship a great God who is loving and faithful.

Pastor John MacArthur (*The Ultimate Priority* [Moody Press], p. 156) tells about a Jewish woman who went to a synagogue near MacArthur's church for counsel because her marriage was breaking up. She was told that they couldn't counsel her until she had paid her dues. She was upset by this. It was on a Sunday, and as she drove away, she got caught in the crowd going to Grace Community Church and ended up in the service. She was so overwhelmed with the atmosphere of worship that she trusted Christ as her Savior and was baptized a few weeks later. She later told MacArthur that she didn't remember much about his sermon, but she was absolutely in awe of the joy and peace and love that exuded from the people as they worshiped. She had never seen anything like it. Their praise led her to salvation.

What is your focus or aim in life, especially in a time of trial? If your aim is your own happiness, to escape as quickly as you can from your pain, you are living for the wrong thing. That's what those in the world live for. If your aim is to glorify and exalt God by trusting and praising Him even in the midst of trials, you've found God's purpose for your life. The Puritans had it right: Our chief end is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever. If you'll focus on that purpose, He will give you a song even from the cave!

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are some practical ramifications if our focus shifts from God's glory to human happiness?
2. How can we know where to draw the line between using effective methods and "raw" faith?
3. Is praising God when you don't feel like it hypocrisy or a matter of obedience?
4. A Christian who has just lost a child bitterly asks, "How can a good God allow this?" What would you say?

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