

Pastor Steven J. Cole
Flagstaff Christian Fellowship
123 S. Beaver St.
Flagstaff, AZ 86001
www.fcfonline.org

HOW TO GET HELP FROM GOD

Psalm 107

By

Steven J. Cole

September 19, 1993

Copyright, 1993

September 19, 1993
Psalms: Lesson 19

How To Get Help From God Psalm 107

A man was the sole survivor of a shipwreck. He was able to make a raft from some of the ship's cargo and drifted to a deserted island. There he constructed a makeshift shelter and lived on what little food he had been able to salvage from the wreckage. Time after time he tried in vain to attract the attention of a passing ship. Finally, he saw a ship approaching more closely and hurriedly lit a signal fire. To his dismay, the ship passed by and was quickly fading from sight.

Accidentally, the flames from the signal fire set the thatched roof of his shelter on fire. The man watched helplessly as all of his provisions burned to ashes. All was lost, he thought. He didn't see how his life could last much longer. But then he noticed that the ship which had passed by him had turned around and was approaching the island again. To his relief, he was seen by the crew and rescued.

Once on board, he went to the captain to express his thanks. He asked, "What caused you to turn around after you had already gone by me?" The captain answered, "We saw the smoke you made by setting your shelter on fire." The very thing that seemed to seal his doom was the means of his delivery.

A lot of people view their problems like that marooned man. They see no point or purpose in them. Their problems drive them to despair and hopelessness. Sometimes people blame God and grow bitter because He allows trials to come into their lives. And yet it is often those very trials that God has designed as the means for the person's salvation or growth in grace. The problems bring us to the end of our own resources so that we are forced to call upon God for help.

The fallen human race has a basic problem: we think that we are self-sufficient. We are not, of course, but we think we are. In order for God to communicate His love to us, He has to bring us to an awareness of our need to depend totally upon Him.

We all appreciate love the most when we are most aware of our need for the person who loves us. While the analogy does not correspond completely, we can see this to some degree in a marriage. A husband (or wife) who is independent and self-sufficient will not appreciate the love that his (or her) spouse offers as much as the one who realizes his (or her) own needs and how the spouse meets those needs. The analogy breaks down in that it would be unhealthy to be totally dependent on a spouse.

But when it comes to God, we are in fact totally dependent on Him. All things hold together in Christ (Col. 1:17). I take that to mean that if Christ let go, all matter would disintegrate. He is the author and giver of life. We are dependent upon Him for our next breath or heartbeat. That is the fact of the matter. But we do not experientially believe it. And so God designs problems to come into our lives so that we reach the end of ourselves, call out to Him for deliverance, and thereby experience and appreciate His great love.

To receive help from God, you must come to the end of yourself and cry out to Him for His undeserved favor.

That is the message of Psalm 107. It was probably written after Judah had gone into captivity and exile in Babylon and then later returned to the land of Palestine. In Psalm 106:47 there is the cry, "Save us, O Lord our God, and gather us from among the nations." In Psalm 107:2-3, that request has been answered. The psalmist wants to teach his readers how God uses trials (like the exile) to drive us to trust Him.

The main body of the psalm consists of four poetic portraits of people in difficult circumstances. In each case the people were overwhelmed with a *problem* they could not solve; they cried out to God in *prayer*; He answered their prayer with His *provision*; and then there is an exhortation to *praise* God for what he has done. Some commentators see each of the four portraits as poetic ways of referring to the experiences of the exile. Perhaps his readers were wondering why God had allowed such trials. But as you meditate on the psalm, you begin to see that each group pictures fallen humanity from a slightly different angle. *We* are the wanderers, the prisoners, the sick, and the overwhelmed.

The psalm is structured like a sermon. There is an introduction (vv. 1-3) which states his theme of God's loyal love and redemption from the enemy. Then he describes the four groups:

Group 1: Wanderers (4-9)

Group 2: Prisoners (10-16)

Group 3: Sick (due to sin) (17-22)

Group 4: Overwhelmed by circumstances (sailors) (23-32)

Then, there is a summary of God's ways (vv. 33-42), in which the psalmist makes the point that God brings down the self-sufficient, but lifts up the needy who call to Him. In this section there is another cycle:

Plenty > Poverty (vv. 33-34)

Poverty > Plenty (vv. 35-38)

Plenty > Poverty (vv. 39-40)

Poverty > Plenty (vv. 41-42)

Then, as in all good sermons, the psalmist concludes by driving his point home to his readers (v. 43): Are you wise? Then think about it and you will see in these pictures how God works through problems. As you apply it to yourself, you will appreciate the Lord's undeserved love in a fresh way.

Let's go back through the psalmist's sermon in a bit more detail and see how he makes the point that to receive help from God, we must come to the end of ourselves so that we will cry out to God for His undeserved favor.

Introduction (107:1-3):

Verse 1 states the theme: The reader is to give thanks to God for His goodness and lovingkindness (loyal love or undeserved favor). Verses 2 and 3 set the scene a bit more precisely by defining who it is who is to give thanks to the Lord: those He has redeemed from the hand of the enemy and gathered from the lands (i.e., the former exiles).

The idea of redemption implies antecedent bondage. The one needing redemption had fallen under the domination of some alien

power. He could not free himself; he needed a redeemer to free him. God had redeemed Israel, first from slavery in Egypt and then from captivity in Babylon. We who are in Christ have been redeemed spiritually and eternally from bondage to sin, self, and Satan through the blood of Christ. Also, as we walk with Christ, we experience His deliverance from the problems we face in our everyday life. As we realize our helplessness and experience God's gracious help for our problems, we ought to appreciate His love and give thanks to Him. That's the message of Psalm 107.

Four Pictures of Deliverance (107:4-32):

Group 1: Wanderers (vv. 4-9)

This group is lost in the wilderness, aimlessly wandering in confusion. They lack the security and stability of a city to call home. They are hungry, thirsty, and fainting from exhaustion (v. 5). Finally they call out to the Lord (v. 6) and He delivers them and directs them to an inhabited city where their needs are met (v. 9). Therefore they are to give thanks to the Lord for His love and wonderful deeds (v. 8).

The wanderers represent those spiritually who are lost, groping for meaning and purpose apart from God. There is no genuine meaning to life or purpose for living if you live apart from God. You can do the greatest, most noble deeds imaginable for the human race, but what ultimate good does it do? People still die in a few short years and must face eternity. If people are just a bunch of animals who have evolved by chance a bit higher than lower life forms, then the only philosophy that makes sense is, "Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die." People who live apart from God are lost.

There's one thing worse than being lost: being lost and not even knowing that you are lost! I read of a boy and his brother whose grandma took them to Disneyland. During the course of the day, she bought each of them a little flag. At one point, they stopped to watch a parade, as "toy soldiers" marched by playing their instruments. Suddenly, the grandma realized that the four-year-old was gone! Having lost one of our children once at Disneyland, I know the panic she felt! She began frantically searching for him. Then she happened to look up at the parade marching by

and there, at the end of the parade, marching along, smiling happily and waving his flag, was her grandson! He was lost, but he didn't even know he was lost. He was having a great time.

There are a lot of people in this world like that little boy. They're lost, but they don't even know it. They're marching through life having a grand time, unaware that the heavenly Father is concerned that they are lost. But someday the band will stop playing. They will be all alone, facing eternity without God.

Verse 9 tells us the kind of people God helps: The hungry and thirsty soul. It is those who realize they're lost and cry out to God (v. 6) whom He answers. Those who march through life ignoring or denying their desperate need for God will not find Him. He satisfies the thirsty soul and fills the hungry soul with what is good.

Do you feel lost? Jesus says, "I am the Way." Do you feel empty and hungry? Jesus says, "I am the Bread of Life." Do you feel thirsty to know God? Jesus says, "I will give you living Water." Do you feel exhausted and weary? Jesus says, "I will give you rest." To get help from God, you must realize that you are lost, give up your own efforts to find the way, and call out to God. He will lead you to Himself.

Group 2: Prisoners (vv. 10-16)

This group is in captivity, in darkness, misery, and chains, due to rebellion against God's Word. They have spurned the counsel of the Most High (v. 11). Because of their sin, God humbled their hearts with labor and put them into a situation where they came to the end of themselves and found that there was no one to help. Then they cried out to the Lord and He saved them (vv. 13-14).

This group represents those who think they can cast off God's directives and live apart from obedience to His Word. Many in our culture think that their modern way of thinking is far superior to the confining mentality of the Bible. They say, "We want to be free to live as we choose!" But sin always leads to bondage and ultimately brings misery and death.

I find many who claim to be Christians, but they have cast off God's Word and live according to their feelings and to the ways of this self-seeking world. If you talk to them about the need to obey

God's Word, they say, "That's legalism!" But they have turned the grace of God into licentiousness (Jude 4).

Sin is always deceptive. At first it looks great and it seems to meet your needs. But it's like a thirsty man who quenches his thirst with amoebic water. His thirst is quenched for the moment, but it gives him a terrible case of dysentery which dehydrates him all the more, and his latter state is worse than his former.

God graciously sends hardship to such people to the point that they stumble. All the earthly things they have relied on fail them; there is none to help (v. 12). Please note that it is God who sovereignly, graciously brings difficulties into the lives of His people who have spurned His counsel. If you have shrugged off the commands of God's Word because you didn't like them, and now you're having problems, those problems come directly from God for the purpose of humbling your heart so that you will turn back to His Word and submit to it (v. 12).

God wants you to see that you must trust in Him with all your heart and not lean on your own or on the world's understanding (Prov. 3:5). When you come to the end of yourself and cry out to Him, instead of saying, "Too bad! You got yourself into this mess, so I'm not going to help you," God graciously delivers you from the sin which had you in bondage. To get help from God, you've got to abandon all trust in your own wisdom and seek Him and His wisdom through His Word.

Group 3: Sick (due to sin) (vv. 17-22)

Sickness is not always directly due to sin but sometimes it is. The group described in these verses is clearly physically ill due to their sin (see vv. 17-18). The word "fool" (v. 17) in the Bible does not refer to the *mentally* deficient, but to the *morally* deficient. The fool is not unintelligent; he is rebellious. Sin eventually takes a toll on a person emotionally and often physically. Verse 18 reads like a description of a drug addict or alcoholic who has wasted his mind and body.

This group represents those who think they can sin without penalty. Again, God lets them reach the point of despair: "They drew near to death" (v. 18). Until they hit bottom, they weren't willing to turn to God. Finally, they came to the end of themselves.

There was no where to go for help except to God. They cried out to Him and He saved them out of their distresses (v. 19).

Note God's grace in rescuing groups two and three. They're not in trouble because they're lost or overwhelmed (as with groups one and four); they're in trouble because of outright rebellion. They don't deserve God's grace. But that's what grace is: *undeserved* favor. And so God responds to their call for help. If you are in great trouble today and you know that the reason for your trouble is your own rebellion, you may feel that you can't call out to God for help. Not so! Cry out to Him and He will deliver you from your sin to His glory!

Group 4: Overwhelmed by circumstances (vv. 23-32)

As Derek Kidner (Psalms [IVP], 2:386) aptly puts it, this group does not speak so much of "our guilt but of our littleness. The hurricane shakes us into seeing that in a world of gigantic forces, we live by permission, not by good management." These sailors are overwhelmed by circumstances beyond their control. All their wisdom as sailors was swallowed up (v. 27b). If you've ever been in a bad storm at sea, you almost get sea sick just reading verses 26-27. I was in such a storm in a seaworthy Coast Guard boat, and it was scary. I can't imagine what it would be like in the primitive boats of the fifth century, B. C.!

This group represents those who are confident that they can handle life and cope with life's problems in their own strength. These men were skilled in seamanship. It was their business. But God merely spoke and raised up the wind (v. 25) and these self-sufficient sailors were brought to the end of their skills (v. 27, margin). God put them into a situation where they were forced to abandon all trust in themselves and call out to God for deliverance. Through this trial they came to experience God's love and grace.

Thus the psalmist paints these four word-pictures to drive home the point: To receive help from God, you must abandon all trust in yourself and cry out to God for His undeserved favor. By nature we are self-sufficient. So God sovereignly, graciously brings us into situations where every human crutch is knocked away. When we cry out to Him and He delivers us, we can only give thanks for His undeserved love and favor.

Summary of God's Ways (v. 33-42):

The four word-pictures drive the nail in; now the psalmist gives a summary of God's ways to clinch the point. Through a series of four cycles of contrast which describe how God turns plenty into poverty and poverty into plenty, he shows that God strikes down the self-sufficient, but lifts up the needy who call out to Him.

(1) First (vv. 33-34) he describes some people who live in a fruitful land with abundant water. They think they're set for life. But they disobey God and so He turns their fertile land into a wasteland. Sodom and Gomorrah are exhibit A.

(2) Next (vv. 35-38), he describes some people living in a dry wilderness. These people know that they are needy (v. 36, "hungry"). God supplies their needs and blesses them.

(3) But then (vv. 39-40), like Israel in the land after God drove out their enemies and blessed them with material goods, they became self-sufficient and forgot their dependence upon the Lord (Deut. 6:10-12, 8:11-14). I understand the group in verses 39-40 to be like that. So God makes them wander in a pathless waste (v. 40).

(4) Finally (vv. 41-42), those who are needy and know it God sets securely on high away from affliction and blesses them so that the righteous rejoice and the wicked are silenced.

The point is that the self-sufficient, who think they are competent, are really deficient, because God is opposed to the proud. But those who know that they are insufficient in themselves and thereby call out to the Lord are sufficient, because God gives grace to the humble. We must come to the end of ourselves to experience God's grace and love.

Conclusion (v. 43):

The psalmist concludes by appealing to the wise reader to give heed to these things and to consider the lovingkindnesses of the Lord. He is saying, "Apply it to yourself."

Conclusion

There are two kinds of problems portrayed in the psalm that we all experience: (1) Problems resulting from *circumstances* beyond our control (groups 1 and 4). These are due to our *finite* condition.

(2) Problems resulting from our *sin* (groups 2 and 3). These are due to our *fallen* condition. The first step to receive help from God is to recognize that no matter what our problems, we are not self-sufficient. We need God! If our problems stem from known sin, then of course we must turn from our sin to experience God's blessings (Ps. 66:18).

The next step (no matter what the source of the problem), is to call out to the Lord. Acknowledge your dependence on Him. Watch Him deliver you in His own way and time. Then, give thanks to Him. And be sure to tell others of how God delivered you from your problems so that they will learn to turn to God themselves to experience His grace (v. 2).

Preaching is a hazardous occupation, because God usually makes me learn personally the message I'm going to preach. (It's especially dangerous to preach about trials!) You may think that I'm gifted so that sermons effortlessly flow from the Bible through me. Wrong! It's a rare week that I don't struggle with a sermon to the point of thinking, "I can't do it! I don't know what I'm going to say." As I get up to speak, I'm often overwhelmed with my inadequacy. Or, if it isn't the sermon, I'm overwhelmed with ministry needs that I don't know how to cope with. I'm repeatedly made aware of my own inadequacy to serve the Lord. It forces me to cast myself upon God for His mercy, which is precisely where I need to be.

What are your problems? Instead of growing bitter and blaming God for them, view them as divinely designed opportunities to bring you to the end of your own resources so that you will call out to God and experience the beautiful provision of His great love and grace. God doesn't help those who help themselves. He helps the helpless who cast themselves on His mercy.

You may say, "I've sinned too much! I don't deserve God's help!" That's great! You're a candidate for God's grace. Our psalm shows that the undeserving who realize their great need are the only kind of people God helps. No matter how great your problems, you will find mercy from God if you call out to Him for salvation.

Discussion Questions

1. Why is the notion that we can earn God's favor so widespread? How can we avoid it personally?
2. Some say that all trials come from the devil. Why is this unbiblical? How can a good God send trials?
3. Doesn't God want us to feel adequate and competent? How can we serve Him if we feel inadequate and incompetent?
4. Agree/disagree: The most pervasive sin and root of all sins is pride?

Copyright 1993, Steven J. Cole, All Rights Reserved.