

Pastor Steven J. Cole  
Flagstaff Christian Fellowship  
123 S. Beaver Street  
Flagstaff, Arizona 86001  
[www.fcfonline.org](http://www.fcfonline.org)

## TRAPPED, ALONE!

Psalm 142

By

Steven J. Cole

October 18, 2009

© Steven J. Cole, 2009

For access to previous sermons or to subscribe to weekly sermons via email go to: [www.fcfonline.org/sermons](http://www.fcfonline.org/sermons)

Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture  
Quotations are from the New American  
Standard Bible, Updated Edition  
© The Lockman Foundation

October 18, 2009  
Psalms, 2008-09, Lesson 37

## Trapped, Alone! Psalm 142

Caves are interesting places to visit, but I wouldn't want to live in one. I always enjoy caves if there are lights and safe paths to guide you through. But if they shut off the lights, you quickly learn that it would be just plain spooky to spend a single night in a cave, especially *alone*! They're cold and damp. There are dangerous drop-offs and confusing labyrinths where you could easily get lost. And there are all sorts of creepy critters in there! We recently watched a Planet Earth DVD where the photographers had to descend into a cave that had a 300-foot mound of bat guano, teeming with giant cockroaches! It was enough to give you nightmares!

I don't know whether the cave where David was hiding from Saul was teeming with roaches, but I'm sure that he wasn't tempted to hang a "Home Sweet Home" sign there! Somewhere outside, Saul and his army were scouring the countryside looking for David. If they found him, it would mean instant death. So, here he was in a cave. I don't know if he had a torch or an oil lamp, but for sure he didn't have electric lights! Whether he was literally alone or had already been joined by the 400 malcontents who eventually joined him (1 Sam. 22:2), we don't know. But he *felt* alone, trapped, with no escape.

This was not the program that David had envisioned when as a teenager, Samuel had anointed him to be the next king of Israel. Kings live in palaces, with servants waiting on them, eating good food, and enjoying all the luxuries that life can give. Kings do not live in dark, damp, dangerous caves with the bats and other creepy crawlers! It seemed more like a prison (v. 7) than a palace.

But caves are effective classrooms in the school of faith and prayer. Spurgeon observed (*Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit* [Pilgrim Publications], 38:541) that David prayed when he was in the cave, but later when he was in the palace, he fell into temptation and sin with Bathsheba. He adds (*ibid.*), "The caves have heard the best prayers." One of the main courses in the school of faith is learning

how to handle trials. So David as a young man, waiting to be king, found out that class met in a cave.

David wrote one other psalm from the cave (see my sermon, "Singing in the Cave," on Psalm 57, August 8, 1993, on the church web site.) Derek Kidner (*Psalms 73-150* [IVP], p. 473) contrasts the two psalms:

Psalm 57 is bold and animated, almost enjoying the situation for the certainty of its triumphant outcome. In the present psalm the strain of being hated and hunted is almost too much, and faith is at full stretch. But this faith is undefeated, and in the final words it is at last joined by hope.

If I were holed up in a cave, trying to save my life from a madman and his army, and if it seemed as if God had promised me something which He was not delivering, probably the last thing I'd do would be to write praise songs! But David wrote these two, which the Spirit included in Scripture for our benefit. Psalm 142 teaches us how to pray when we feel trapped and alone, with no way of escape from the dark cave of overwhelming trials.

When God puts you in circumstances where you feel trapped and alone, cry out to Him in believing prayer.

Derek Kidner (*ibid.*, pp. 473-474) has a helpful outline: "My plea (1-3a); My plight (3b-4); My portion (5-6a); and, My prospect (6b-7). I will follow it, except I think it's helpful first to look at "My plight," before we look at "My plea."

Also, before we look at these sections of the psalm, note that it is very individual. David writes, "I cry aloud ... I make supplication ... I pour out my complaint ... I declare my trouble" (vv. 1-2). The first person pronoun continues throughout the psalm. This teaches us that faith in God must be personal. Your parents' faith will not do when you find yourself in a cave. Husbands, your wife's faith is good for her, but it won't get you through dark, difficult trials. You must know God personally through personal repentance and faith in Jesus Christ. And you must know personally how to call upon Him when you feel trapped, lonely, and under attack.

Also, your faith in the Lord must be strong enough that you can stand alone when you need to. It's great to have fellow Christians who can pray with you and support you. David looks forward

to that day at the end of the psalm. But there are many times when fellow Christians and perhaps even your family will not stand with you. They may distance themselves from you because of your convictions. They may criticize you for being too gung ho about your faith. David had felt the scorn of his own brothers when he went out to fight Goliath (1 Sam. 17:28). Although I grew up in a Christian home, I still remember a time early in my college days when it dawned on me, "I've got to follow Christ as *my* Lord no matter what my family or anyone else may do." If you've never made that personal commitment to Christ, you *must* begin there.

David had done that. As a young shepherd, he knew God as his personal Shepherd (Ps. 23:1). He had trusted God to help him defend the flock against lions and bears (1 Sam. 17:34-35). He had trusted God to defeat the Philistine giant, Goliath. As a result, he had been catapulted into national fame. Saul appointed David over the army. But his unsought early fame and military success had aroused the insane jealousy of King Saul. So he had to flee for his life and now, here he was, hiding in the cave, trapped and alone. While few of us can identify with David's early fame and success, perhaps we can identify with his plight:

1. My plight: The enemy has me trapped and lonely, with no one to care for my soul (vv. 3b-4).

"In the way where I walk they have hidden a trap for me. Look to the right and see; for there is no one who regards me; there is no escape for me; no one cares for my soul." In verse 7, he describes his situation as being in prison.

We can't know for sure whether David was literally all alone in the cave, or whether he just felt alone. In 1 Samuel 22:1-2 we read, "So David ... escaped to the cave of Adullam; and when his brothers and all his father's household heard of it, they went down there to him. Everyone who was in distress, and everyone who was in debt, and everyone who was discontented gathered to him; and he became captain over them. Now there were about four hundred men with him."

When David says, "Look to the right and see; for there is no one who regards me," he means either that there was no one to defend him militarily or that there was no one to defend him by

presenting his case in court. When he says, “no one cares for my soul,” it may be that although he had these 400 men there with him, they were all so focused on their own troubles that they did not care about David’s troubles. So he may not have been alone physically, but he *felt* alone emotionally and spiritually. Or, he may have written the psalm *before* these men started moving into the cave with him.

I’m not sure which would be the greater problem: to be all alone in a cave, fearing for your life, or to be there with 400 malcontents who are now looking to you for leadership and provision! It would be no small feat to provide enough food and water every day for 400 men, let alone deal with the inevitable squabbles that would have erupted among men with their baggage of troubles! But whether alone or with 400 discontented men, David felt trapped and lonely, with no one to care for his soul.

You don’t have to be in his exact circumstances to have the same feelings. Maybe you feel trapped and alone in a dark cave of guilt. You’ve done things that you know are wrong. Perhaps you fled from that situation, but you’d be ashamed if anyone in your current situation learned about your past. Your guilt has alienated you from God. You don’t know who to talk to or where to turn. David wrote other psalms about the painful experience of feeling the guilt of his sins (Psalms 32, 38, 51).

Maybe you feel trapped and alone because you profess to be a Christian, but you’re enslaved to some life-dominating sin. It makes you ashamed to tell others about Christ. It alienates you from fellow believers. If your Christian friends knew the truth, you fear that they would distance themselves from you. Maybe you wonder whether your faith is genuine.

Or, maybe the cave that has you feeling trapped and alone is not due to your sin or guilt, but rather to your Christian commitment. Your family feels convicted by your stand for Christ, so they have pressured you to tone it down. When that didn’t work, they drew back and excluded you from feeling like you’re part of the family. They don’t invite you to family gatherings, or if they do, when you get there, no one talks with you. Or, at work you catch flak because you’re a Christian. Your fellow workers don’t include

you in their circle of friendship. The boss favors the workers who laugh at his dirty jokes, and they get the promotions.

Whatever your circumstances, if you have made the commitment to follow Christ as Lord, you've probably felt as David felt here: no escape, lonely, and no one who cares for you. What should you do when you're there? Again, it's one of God's most effective classrooms in the school of faith and prayer.

2. My plea: Help me, Lord, because You know my path (vv. 1-3a).

Matthew Henry wrote (*Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible* [Revell], 3:764-765), "There is no cave so deep, so dark, but we may out of it send up our prayers, and our souls in prayer, to God." So no matter how trapped or alone you may feel, you can still cry out to God in prayer. This psalm is titled a "maskil," and while we don't know for sure what that means in the psalm titles, the verb means "to make wise or prudent, or to have success or skill" (Kidner, 1:38). This psalm teaches us some important lessons on how to be wise or skillful in prayer. I suggest three:

A. Prayer should be heartfelt and honest, but always in submission to God and His sovereign will.

You can't miss the intensity of David's prayer (vv. 1-2): "I cry aloud with my voice to the Lord; I make supplication with my voice to the Lord. I pour out my complaint before Him; I declare my trouble before Him." Again (vv. 5, 6), "I cried out to You, O Lord; ... Give heed to my cry, for I am brought very low; deliver me from my persecutors, for they are too strong for me." The repetition drives home David's fervency. He is in deep water, over his head, and so like a drowning man, he cries out, "Help! Save me or I perish!"

Of course, David's fervency came out of a very desperate situation. He literally feared for his life. Our normal, everyday prayers will not always be so heartfelt and fervent. But, I've never forgotten since I first read it many years ago, an entry that missionary martyr Jim Elliot wrote in his journal at age 19 (*Shadow of the Almighty*, by Elisabeth Elliot [Zondervan], p. 44, italics his):

I lack the fervency, vitality, *life* in prayer which I long for. I know that many consider it fanaticism when they hear any-

thing which does not conform to the conventional, sleep-inducing eulogies so often rising from Laodicean lips; but I know too that these same people can acquiescently tolerate sin in their lives and in the church without so much as tilting one hair of their eyebrows. Cold prayers, like cold suitors, are seldom effective in their aims.

David says (v. 2), "I pour out my complaint before Him." I've heard many say that this verse and other similar psalms teach us to be honest in our prayers. I agree; we should not be hypocrites toward God, offering up a nice, polite prayer when our hearts are hurting because of our circumstances. He knows our thoughts, so we can't hide anything from Him.

But these same folks also often encourage people, "Tell God off, if you feel like it. Let Him know how angry you are at Him." That, it seems to me, goes beyond anything we find in the psalms or anywhere else in Scripture. It encourages people to sin by railing at the loving, all-wise Sovereign of the universe! I contend that that is *never* permissible or wise.

We're free to be honest with the Lord, but always with a submissive heart to His sovereign will. If I'm angry with God, I need to confess and turn from my anger before I can rightly pray to Him about other things. When my kids were younger, perhaps they had a complaint against me. Since I'm human, it may have been a *legitimate* complaint! They would say, "Dad, you promised to do something with me today, but you forgot." If they complained with a submissive attitude, I would listen and respond. But if they came at me angrily and defiantly, even if their complaint was legitimate, I would first deal with their disrespectful spirit. They weren't allowed to rail defiantly at me as their father, even if I were at fault.

When it comes to the Sovereign of the universe, He is *always* right. He *never* wrongs anyone. He always disciplines us for our good (Heb. 12:10). If He gave us what we deserve, we'd all go straight to hell. So even if we feel that we've been treated unfairly, before we bring our complaint to Him, we'd better deal with our attitude. Be honest, yes, but always in submission to God, showing reverence to Him as Lord and Master.

B. Prayer is an acknowledgement of our own insufficiency and God's all-sufficiency.

David admits that his spirit was overwhelmed within him (v. 3). He says that there is no escape (v. 4). He was "brought very low" (v. 6). His enemies were "too strong" for him (v. 6). He felt like he was in prison (v. 7). He wasn't saying, "I've just about got this figured out, Lord, but I need a little boost." Rather, he was admitting his own insufficiency, but God's all-sufficiency.

A main reason that we do not pray at all times, as the Bible tells us to do (Eph. 6:18; 1 Thess. 5:17) is that we don't recognize our own insufficiency. We proudly think, "I can handle this by myself." So the Lord graciously puts us in situations where we're overwhelmed, so that we learn to depend on Him alone.

C. Prayer is not to inform God of our situation, but to prepare us to receive from Him the things that we ask.

God knows all things. He knew David's path (v. 3). Not only does He know our paths; also, He ordains our paths (Ps. 139:16). As Jesus pointed out (Matt. 6:8), "Your Father knows what you need before you ask Him." So prayer is not to inform God about our situation!

Why pray, then? Prayer, in part, is to help us recognize and verbalize our needs, so that we consciously depend on God to supply those needs. Jonathan Edwards wrote ("A Treatise on Religious Affections," in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* [Banner of Truth], 1:242):

It is manifest, we are not appointed, in this duty [prayer], to declare God's perfections, his majesty, holiness, goodness, and all-sufficiency; our own meanness, emptiness, dependence, and unworthiness, our wants and desires, in order to inform God of these things, or to incline his heart, and prevail with him to be willing to show us mercy; but rather suitably to affect our own hearts with the things we express, and so to prepare us to receive the blessings we ask.

Note, also, that David twice states that his cry or supplication (the Hebrew word means, "an appeal to kindness," Kidner, 473) is "to the Lord" (v. 1). Twice again he pours out his complaint and declares his trouble "before Him" (v. 2). The Hebrew word trans-

lated *before Him* is, literally, “to His face.” It teaches us that prayer is not just running through a list of requests. Rather, prayer is coming into God’s presence and communing with Him face to face.

We have seen David’s plight, which is often, my plight. We’ve seen his plea, which should be my plea.

3. My portion: The Lord is my refuge and my portion (vv. 5-6a).

“I cried out to You, O Lord; I said, ‘You are my refuge, my portion in the land of the living. Give heed to my cry, for I am brought very low.’” Although David was hiding in a cave, he didn’t see the cave as his refuge, but rather, the Lord. He didn’t look to his position as the future king as his portion. Rather, whether in a cave or in a palace, the Lord was his portion (Ps. 16:5; 73:26).

Jonathan Edwards has a wonderful sermon titled, “The Christian Pilgrim” (*The Works of Jonathan Edwards* [Banner of Truth], 2:243-246). I have this paragraph under the glass on my desk, so that I can read it often. Even though he doesn’t use the word *portion*, he is describing God as our best portion (p. 244, italics his):

God is the highest good of the reasonable creature; and the enjoyment of him is the only happiness with which our souls can be satisfied. To go to heaven, fully to enjoy God, is *infinitely* better than the most pleasant accommodations here. Fathers and mothers, husbands, wives, or children, or the company of earthly friends, are but shadows; but the enjoyment of God is the substance. These are but scattered beams; but God is the sun. These are but streams; but God is the fountain. These are but drops; but God is the ocean. Therefore it becomes us to spend this life only as a journey towards heaven, as it becomes us to make the seeking of our highest end and proper good, the whole work of our lives; to which we should subordinate all other concerns of life. Why should we labor for, or set our hearts on, any thing else, but that which is our proper end, and true happiness?

So we’ve seen my plight, my plea, and my portion. Finally,

4. My prospect: The Lord will deliver me so that I may give thanks to Him in the company of the righteous (vv. 6b-7).

“Deliver me from my persecutors, for they are too strong for me. Bring my soul out of prison, so that I may give thanks to Your name; the righteous will surround me, for You will deal bountifully with me.” Having thought about God as his refuge and portion, David now moves from despair to confident hope. He knows that he is weak, but his God is stronger than any enemies. So by faith he looks ahead to the time when he will give thanks to God for rescuing him, surrounded by God’s people.

Note that David’s focus is not, “Deliver me so that I will be happy again.” So often, that is the implied (if not stated) aim of our prayers. “I’m unhappy in these trials. Deliver me so that I’ll be happy.” But that’s the wrong motive for prayer. David wants to be delivered “so that I may give thanks to Your name.” Some versions translate it, “praise Your name.” The Hebrew verb means to confess or acknowledge. David wants to extol God’s power and faithfulness and mercy in the company of the saints. In other words, he wants God to answer his prayer so that he can glorify God. In the other psalm from the cave, David twice repeats the refrain (Ps. 57:5, 11), “Be exalted above the heavens, O God; let Your glory be above all the earth.” That is always a solid ground for our prayers.

### Conclusion

If your troubles do not lead you to go deeper in faith and prayer, you’re missing the lesson of the cave! Let your loneliness, gloom, and despair make you cry out to the Lord to bring your soul out of prison, so that you may give thanks to His name! The Lord knows you’re there. Let the cave hear your best prayers!

### Application Questions

1. Why does God allow some of His choicest saints to spend time in caves or prisons? What have you learned from your cave experiences?
2. When do we cross the line from permissible complaining to God to sinful railing against Him?
3. How can we wean ourselves from viewing this world as our portion, so that we view God as our portion?
4. Is our *true* happiness opposed to God’s glory or wrapped up in His glory? Discuss the implications.

Copyright, Steven J. Cole, 2009, All Rights Reserved.