

When the Going Gets Tough

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Scripture Reading: Psalm 59 (NIV)

¹ For the director of music. To the tune of "Do Not Destroy." Of David. A miktam. When Saul had sent men to watch David's house in order to kill him. Deliver me from my enemies, O God; be my fortress against those who are attacking me.

² Deliver me from evildoers and save me from those who are after my blood.

³ See how they lie in wait for me! Fierce men conspire against me for no offense or sin of mine, LORD.

⁴ I have done no wrong, yet they are ready to attack me. Arise to help me; look on my plight!

⁵ You, LORD God Almighty, you who are the God of Israel, rouse yourself to punish all the nations; show no mercy to wicked traitors.

⁶ They return at evening, snarling like dogs, and prowl about the city.

⁷ See what they spew from their mouths— the words from their lips are sharp as swords, and they think, "Who can hear us?"

⁸ But you laugh at them, LORD; you scoff at all those nations.

⁹ You are my strength, I watch for you; you, God, are my fortress,

¹⁰ my God on whom I can rely. God will go before me and will let me gloat over those who slander me.

¹¹ But do not kill them, Lord our shield, or my people will forget. In your might uproot them and bring them down.

¹² For the sins of their mouths, for the words of their lips, let them be caught in their pride. For the curses and lies they utter,

¹³ consume them in your wrath, consume them till they are no more. Then it will be known to the ends of the earth that God rules over Jacob.

¹⁴ They return at evening, snarling like dogs, and prowl about the city.

¹⁵ They wander about for food and howl if not satisfied.

¹⁶ But I will sing of your strength, in the morning I will sing of your love; for you are my fortress, my refuge in times of trouble.

¹⁷ You are my strength, I sing praise to you; you, God, are my fortress, my God on whom I can rely.”

Introduction

How often, when we pray, we pray a short prayer with a specific outcome in mind? When we are ill, we pray for good health. When our bank balance threatens to haunt us, we pray for financial provision. When someone is gossiping about us, we pray for their mouth to be silenced. When we experience emotional or physical pain, we ask God to take the pain away.

Basically, when we pray these prayers, we ask God to replace our present minus with a supernatural plus, often forgetting that sometimes, in facing a minus, not only will He be glorified, but we grow in Him.

Body

David was having a hard time! In Psalm 57, he describes his enemies as lions, ravenous beasts who are looking to devour him, in Psalm 58 he describes his enemies as dangerous snakes, filled with deadly venom, which cannot be charmed no matter how skilful the charmer is and in this morning’s reading of Psalm 59, like wild dogs.

David could write Psalm 59 because he made it through. The Psalm is filled with confidence, faith, and praise.

All of us have our “wild dogs” to deal with. Some people don’t like us, some people want to harm us, and some circumstances seek to overwhelm us. And in the midst of it all, we stand innocent – these are those things that we have to face, that we don’t deserve and did not ask for.

Today, we face a choice: to either respond with aggression, revenge, bitterness and so on, or we can learn something from David, who testifies of God's refuge, rescue, and goodness.

David was facing death. Saul had sent men to watch his house and to kill him. History teaches us that Saul's men had actually surrounded the house – in their numbers. Saul's men were not going to storm into David's house, instead, they were waiting for David to go out of his house in the morning and then murder him. There seemed no way for David to escape, and unless he managed to escape during the night, he would die at dawn. Michal – the daughter of Saul and first wife of David – let David down through a window and he managed to escape.

David's initial response was the same as ours would be, in other words, get me out of this, protect me. But that was the beginning of his prayer. David was painfully aware of his present situation:

- People were lying in wait. And not to bring him breakfast. They were after his life.
- He acknowledges that this is evil.
- He grasps the fierceness of his enemies.
- He maintains his innocence.
- And much more.

But right throughout the Psalm, he is aware of who God is, God's holiness, God's justice, God's protection, God's power and from this vantage point, he knows that God will act, not necessarily exactly as he might want, but that God will act according to God's will and God's purposes and in God's time.

There is this ongoing discussion where David contrasts his problems with the realization of who God is. He knows that God is mighty, and he wants his enemies to know this as well. His enemies need to know that they are in fact, challenging the power of God.

When David asks God to defend Him, the Hebrew speaks of setting him on high, in other words, make me inaccessible to my enemies and therefore David says that God is His fortress. In this sense, his enemies were challenging the place where God is protecting David.

In the middle of all that is going on, David says, “But do not kill them, Lord our shield, or my people will forget.” David does not lose focus of the bigger picture.

Where does this leave us?

- A dear friend is in hospital, first, she had Leukaemia, then COVID and now has COVID for a second time.
- Another friend is in hospital with COVID. In fact, she and her mother were next to each other, both with COVID.
- My youngest son had a cancer scare and received chemo.
- And I am sure that you, with ease, can add to this list.
- And I am also sure that you will agree with me when I say that enough is going on around us to overwhelm us like a tsunami.

The question is, how are we going to respond? We will pray...but how? I suggest discussing matters with God and part of this discussion should be acknowledging who God is, in our present circumstances. He is with us: Immanuel. This will help shift your focus from your situation toward God. It does not mean that you will forget or ignore your present situation, but it does mean that you will see them in the correct context, from a place of safety; a place of refuge – from the perspective of seeing your problems in the context of the will, purpose, place, and timing of God.

Our primary goal in our moment of trouble, is not to escape the trouble, but to praise and glorify God despite our trouble.

I am mindful that David started the Psalm with “Deliver me from my enemies, O God” and finished it with singing God’s praises. Men were waiting to kill him in the morning, and David writes in verse 16, “in the morning I will sing of your love.”

God was David’s fortress, his place of safety. This he confessed in verse 1, at the beginning of the Psalm, in verse 16 and 17 at the end of the Psalm and in verse 9, more or less in the middle of the Psalm. What then is a reoccurring theme in this Psalm? The revelation of who God is, not only when we are in trouble, but all the time – He does not change.

Conclusion

We are reminded that despite seemingly hopeless circumstances, we can and must sing God's praises.

We are reminded that God is working in all things.

We are reminded that God chose us.

We are reminded that in our moment of need, God does not turn deaf, He does not run away, and He does not stop loving us.

We are reminded that while the things happening around us may shake us and tempt some of us to retaliate, we are called to exercise our faith in God and to call out to Him.

We are reminded that this Psalm was set to music – David handed it over for use by the temple choir. It was marked for special use with the spring festivities, at Passover. The life-threatening situation of David, despite how he felt, is an opportunity to praise God.

We are reminded of the work of Jesus at Passover 2000 years ago, who did see death on the cross, was resurrected, ascended, and is seated at the right hand of God. We are reminded that we are in Christ Jesus.

Think for a moment about this contrast:

- 1. David described his enemies as snarling dogs.
- 2. David describes God as an impenetrable fortress.

We too, therefore, can sing out Psalm 59:16-17, "But I will sing of your strength, in the morning I will sing of your love; for you are my fortress, my refuge in times of trouble. You are my strength, I sing praise to you; you, God, are my fortress, my God on whom I can rely."

Amen.