

## **Exalting Amid Anguish – Psalm 57**

*Five Points Community Church (9/6/15) Brett Toney*

The Psalms are repetitive, as JJ mentioned last week. But I think that is also what makes them so appealing. The Psalms serve us in providing divinely inspired responses to the Lord's providences for our lives. But we are a diverse people. If God had only inspired seven to ten psalms, one touching on each general type of psalm, I don't think they would be nearly as loved. The slight differences and nuances of similar psalms might make the difference of what the Lord uses to stir faith in your heart towards God's King or help you faithfully pursue righteousness described in God's Word. Psalm 124, which we looked at last week, speaks of how to respond to suffering: "Say it again, 'The LORD is on our side.'" And Psalm 57, which we are looking at this morning, speaks of how to respond to suffering, by exalting amid anguish. So let's ask the Lord to meet us as we come to his Word, anticipating he will use *this* psalm to stir faith and encourage holiness in a way that he didn't in *last week's* psalm.

### **Crying Out in Confidence (v.1-3)**

Did you hear the pleading in David's voice when this psalm was read? Can you identify with it? "Be merciful to me, O God, be merciful to me." The king likely penned this psalm when recalling the Lord's many kindnesses to him. How readily he was brought back into that cave—maybe his heart even started racing, his breathing became shallower, and that old anxiety started to rise. He was a man under pursuit, a rabbit run into a hole. And in that moment of desperation, he cries out to his God. You hear the earnestness in his repetition. You feel the need in his appeal, "O God!" And knowing the thing his own heart needs to hear most, he proclaims, "In you my soul takes refuge." His own prayer is a sermon to himself, "Soul, find refuge in the LORD!"

Commentator Derek Kidner nails it, “[W]here most men would have named the cave as [their refuge], David saw beyond it. Solid rock, by itself, could be a trap as easily as a stronghold.”<sup>1</sup> David didn’t set his hope on his hideout but in the Holy One. In that dark, musty cave, David didn’t puff himself up in reflecting on his own ingenuity in selecting a safe haven. He humbled himself before God, knowing his efforts were futile apart from the Lord’s gracious provision to be his refuge. He knew that the Lord was “like an eagle that stirs up its nest, that flutters over its young, spreading out its wings, catching them, bearing them up on its pinions” (Deuteronomy 32:11). He knew in his moment of desperation, in his anguish, that to the Lord alone was where he could turn. He knew that he could weather anything with the Lord at his side.

But he wasn’t just complaining to some generic “higher power.” He wasn’t murmuring to get it off his chest. He was crying out with confidence because the one in whom he found refuge was God Most High. It was not just to any refuge that he turned but to the strongest one. He cried out to the one who reigns sovereign over all things and does as he pleases. Again Kidner, “God’s exaltation as ‘Most High’ does not make him remote: only unhampered in sending help ....”<sup>2</sup> Why in the world would David sit contented in a cave, thinking he was safe, when the Lord of heaven and earth stood at the ready to provide aid?

And O what aid he will provide! “He will send from heaven and save me ... God will send out his steadfast love and his faithfulness!” The Lord sending love and faithfulness doesn’t mean David will get a cutesy Hallmark card delivered on the wings of a dove. It is a reference to the covenant faithfulness of God. David is busting out the contract. “God, you said you would be *my* God, that you would bless me and keep me and make your face shine upon me. Be true to

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<sup>1</sup> Derek Kidner, *Psalm 1-72* (IVP, 1973), p.223.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, 224.

your covenant. Be true to your character! And be merciful to me!” I think it pleases the Lord when his people pray like this, when we invoke his character as revealed in his Word. That kind of prayer demonstrates that we know who he is, and it exalts him as his glory is so communicated.

But as we reflect on how David cried out with confidence, we have to look at ourselves. What cave do you run to in your affliction? Do you look beyond it to see that truly it is God Most High who is your refuge or are you too near-sighted? Do you only see the cave walls around you? Do you know God and his Word to appeal to his covenant and character? Or is Christianity more just a lucky charm to you? We can run to all kinds of places to find refuge. We can run to our own planning, enough money in savings, cell phones for teenage drivers so they are just a text away. All of those things are good; caves aren't bad. It can be presumptuously foolish to *not* run into a cave. But it is idolatrously foolish to think the cave alone will be your refuge. After all, “Unless the LORD watches over the city, the watchman stays awake in vain” (Psalm 127:1).

And we now have exceedingly greater reason to cry out to God Most High, for he has definitively sent from heaven to save. He has sent out his covenant love and the highest display of his faithfulness. Through the incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, we can know far more certainly that God will fulfill all of his covenantal purposes for his own. Because you have the indwelling Holy Spirit, Christian, the one sent from Heaven to apply the New Covenant blessings, you can cry out to the LORD. You can lament and plead before him. You can know that the God of heaven and earth is by your side.

Just pause and reflect on that. No, really, that's what is intended for us at this point in the psalm. That little italicized word on the right side of the column in your Bible, “*selah*,” is an

editorial notation most likely meaning we are to either pause and reflect on what we have just read or lift up our voices in praise. Don't hurry past the reality that your God is one who does all that he pleases and accomplishes all that he intends. Don't breeze over the certainty that he will faithfully act according to his revealed character. The holy God has taken on flesh to be crucified and resurrected that you might ultimately be delivered from all of your affliction and suffering.

Pause.            Reflect on that.            Does it make you want to sing?

### **Assurance in Affliction (v.4-5)**

“My soul is in the midst of lions; I lie down amid fiery beasts—the children of man, whose teeth are spears and arrows, whose tongues are sharp swords” (v.4). David is being attacked on all sides. It is not just that he is being pursued by those who would kill him, but he is being verbally attacked. “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me” is a fine thing to teach resiliency to kids, but it is simply not true. The tongue is mighty. Words cut deeper than any stick or stone. You know this. In the heat of an argument, your spouse let that dagger slip, and it penetrated deep. Or those words spoken in confidence, weren't, well, kept quite so confidential. So whether it was an outright verbal assault or the whispers that are kindling for quarreling (cf. Proverbs 26:20), David is in affliction.

And so how does he pray? What does faith in God look like when confronted with such a situation? Though he is attacked on all sides (v.4), David's most earnest desire is for God to be praised. His plea is not ultimately for his own deliverance but for God to be praised in and through his suffering. He feels as though he is going to be entirely consumed by a pack of lions or a raging fire. And as he turns to the Lord, he pleads, “Be exalted, O God, above the heavens!” Foremost in David's thinking in the midst of such deep affliction is that God would be glorified in and through it.

David's plea—flowing from his right view that God sovereignly fulfills his covenant purposes for him—his plea is not a trite application of Romans 8:28, God working all things together for the good of those who love him. That's not the kind of thing David is getting at. He isn't whitewashing his suffering with what Paul Tripp would call “spiritual-sounding non-answers.” He isn't just pleading for God to be exalted because that's what religious people do when they suffer. Rather, I think it is more like an application of Romans 8:29, that he will be conformed to the image of God's Son. How will God be exalted in David's suffering? Chiefly by David being more conformed to the image of his greater Son.

In the midst of suffering, being told that God will work it all out for good can be trivializing and unhelpful. Knowing that he is making you more like his Son provides depth. It may be that he never delivers you from a specific situation of suffering in this life, and so it seems that God is *not* faithful to work it all for good. However, in such protracted suffering he is nevertheless conforming you evermore so into the image of his Son. In your suffering, God is chiseling away at you to fashion you to look more Jesus. He is bringing you from one degree of glory to the next (2 Corinthians 3:18).

So this plea for God to be exalted is one for God to be magnified in you whether in life or death, because you know that “though your heart and your flesh may fail, God is the strength of your heart and your portion forever” (Psalm 73:25). David is so satisfied in all that God is for him that he would sing, “Though sorrows like sea billows roll ... it is well, it is well, with my soul.” So yes, “O God, be exalted though I lie down in the midst of my enemies. Be glorified, My Redeemer, even though I am attacked on all sides.”

David's prayer is commendable. It is worthy of imitation. But how readily my prayers are aimed at relieving my affliction and less concerned with God being exalted in and through it. As

you wrestle with what God is doing in the hardship you are walking through, are you just asking God to bring it to an end or that his name is hallowed and his will be done on earth as it is in Heaven (Matthew 6:9-10)? Looking to and hoping in the Lord like David does is not instinctual; it is learned. Responding to suffering in this life by crying out for God to be glorified through it comes as you are sanctified and as you set your hope there, set your hope on God as David does.

And there is intentionality needed on your part to cultivate this kind of response to suffering. Yes, it is a work of the Spirit in sanctifying you and satisfying you more and more in Christ alone. But resolving to find refuge in the LORD must be cultivated. Honestly and earnestly yearning for God to be exalted in and through your suffering is something you do as God does it in you. This is an aspect of sanctification. And responding in this way to *small* suffering will prepare you to respond this way to *significant* suffering.

I blew an opportunity in cultivating this kind of response in small suffering this week. Friday morning I wasn't feeling well, I was tired, I was getting frustrated with my kids while my wife was at an appointment. Did I cry out to God Most High and take refuge in him in the midst of such insignificant suffering? No, I got grumpy and snippy. I thought *I* was "Most High." Foremost in my thinking and affections was not the exaltation of God but of myself. "Be merciful to me, O God, be merciful to me." We have to take hold of the little sufferings so we are prepared to walk through the significant sufferings.

### **Declaration of Worship (v.6-9)**

Because what was true for David might not be true for you: God answered his request for deliverance. Verse 6 is the turning point of the psalm—I'm grateful to Allen Ross in seeing the significance of this verse as the decisive moment of the psalm.<sup>3</sup> Do you see it? "They," David's enemies or pursuers, they set the nets and dig pits to snare and entrap, but *they* fall into them!

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<sup>3</sup> Allen Ross, *A Commentary on the Psalms, vol 2* (Kregel, 2013), p.280.

They fall to their own devices. God delivers the psalmist from the plot of his enemies. David was at the end of himself; he was thoroughly humbled and could do nothing. But God was on his side and sent from heaven to save. So David turns to high praise!

No longer is his heart bowed down; now his heart is steadfast. His soul is firmly established. No longer is he in anguish and on the brink of faltering. He is firmly rooted and established upon seeing the Lord answer his prayers. And he will make sure everyone knows it. David calls out, “Awake, my glory!” He is calling his once bowed down soul to stand up and arise out of its sullen sleep. That’s what he means when he says, “my glory”; it’s a reference to his soul, his core self (cf. Psalm 16:9). “Awake, O harp and lyre!” Get that guitar tuned up and ready to go—we’re going to praise God! “I will awake the dawn!” We’re not waiting! “Sun, rise! The LORD is worthy of praise *now!*”

But this is not a one-man-band. David is not content that God be praised for his deliverance merely in a single cave or by one man. God’s praise must be heralded by all peoples in all the world. David’s praise has global implications. This is one way in which the promise to Abraham is to be fulfilled. In his covenant with the patriarch, God promised that the offspring of Abraham would be a blessing to the nations. And Israel was planted in the midst of a watching world after a remarkable deliverance from Egyptian slavery. “Who is this God who brought this people into this land?” David’s praise, the praise of God’s people, is a witness to the world that there is a God in Heaven who sovereignly sends out his covenant love and faithfulness to save his own. That is blessing; that is covenant fulfillment in action.

And our worship falls utterly short if it terminates within these walls. God is not content to be merely praised on one street corner. He will not be praised by one ethnicity. No, he is after international, multi-ethnic, multi-lingual praise because he is God Most High. There is no God

greater. There is none more worthy of such acclaim. So David must—*we must*—“sing praises [to the LORD] among the nations.” How else will they learn of this God?

Now I don’t mean you need to start breaking out into the “Doxology” in the break room. But how do you respond to the Lord’s many kindnesses in your life? Do you even recognize them? God’s praise ought to be so readily on our lips that our neighbors and the nations might hear of him.

### **Foundation & Fruit of Worship (v.10-11)**

But let us not miss the true ground of David’s praise. His deliverance under the sovereign provision of his God is the impetus of his praise, but the foundational reason why David summons the whole creation to praise his God is God himself. David will give inter-ethnic thanks because God’s covenant love and faithfulness is so praiseworthy. This is the same love and faithfulness David was sure would be sent from Heaven (v.3). God has shown himself true to form yet again. He is the same yesterday and today and forever (Hebrews 13:8). And so David concludes with the refrain from v.5, however it is no longer a plea but a victorious declaration, as Allen Ross observed.<sup>4</sup> God has accomplished the plea from v.5. He is being exalted above the heavens, and his glory is spreading over all the earth. In light of deliverance, the plea shifts to exuberant praise.

### **The Lord’s Table**

This Table is a vivid reminder that God has sent from Heaven to save, that he *has* most definitively sent out his covenant love and faithfulness. And it is a call to all who would believe on Jesus and be saved to join all peoples in joyfully declaring, “Be exalted, O God, above the heavens! Let your glory be over all the earth!”

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.