

Cries from the Cave

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Chad Boorsma

Psalm 142

150. That, of course, is how many psalms are contained in the Bible. While a third of the psalms are orphaned, meaning we don't know who wrote them, the rest have the author listed with the superscription or the heading of the psalm. There we find names like Moses, the Sons of Korah, Asaph, Solomon, and Heman the Ezrahite. But none of these authors have their names listed as many times as David, the one who penned Psalm 142, along with 72 other chapters of the Psalter.

Along with David's name, some of the superscriptions on his Psalms give us insight as to when and where they were written. Probably the most famous of these is Psalm 51, written by David after he was confronted by Nathan for his sin, abusive treatment of Bathsheba, and murder of Uriah the Hittite. "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love," David prays. "According to your great compassion, blot out all my transgressions." Another example of a Davidic psalm with a specific context is Psalm 3, when he is fleeing from his son, Absalom, and cries out, "Lord, how many are my foes! How many rise up against me!"

In our psalm for this evening, we also find a superscription below the title, although it doesn't include the amount of detail we find in the psalms just mentioned. It simply says, "When he was in the cave. A prayer."

Most scholars believe this could be referring to one of two incidents. One possibility is what we read in 1 Samuel 24:1-3, when David and his men are hiding from Saul in a cave near En Gedi. This is the same incident where Saul enters the cave to relieve himself, and David, who could have killed him, just cuts off a piece of his robe. The other possibility, and perhaps a bit more likely, is found in 1 Samuel 22:1-2, when David, in fleeing from Saul, leaves the town of Gath and escapes to the cave in Adullam, where about four hundred men eventually join him.

We can't say for sure to which incident Psalm 142 is referring, and perhaps it really doesn't matter. What matters is that David finds himself in a cave during a very challenging time in his life, a time when he is being hunted like a wild animal by King Saul; the man who is overcome by an evil spirit at times, the one who tries to kill him, the one who becomes enraged when he hears the women dancing and singing, "Saul has slain his thousands, and David his tens of thousands."

Some people go into caves to go spelunking, the exploration of caves and other underground passages, but not David. He goes to the cave to find shelter, safety, and refuge. And it's in the context of the darkness of the cave that we hear David's prayer; his words that he cries out to God. Let's listen to the thoughts that are troubling his mind.

First of all, he tells God about his enemies, which is likely referring to Saul and his troops. He says, as we see in the second half of verse 3, that they are setting some type of trap or snare to catch him wherever he walks, wherever he goes. David doesn't know for sure where the traps are located, but he knows they're out there, and he knows they are waiting for him.

He says more about his enemies in verse 6, where he laments that they are not only setting traps for him, they are also pursuing him and trying to hunt him down. David is a victim of ongoing persecution, being persecuted by those he feels are stronger than him. This man who was once victorious in killing the giant, Goliath, now understands his present weakness for he has been brought low and is in desperate need.

In fact, when we look again to verse 3, we see that David admits that the spirit inside of him is growing faint, or as one translation puts it, his spirit is feeling completely overwhelmed. Being in the cave, or more likely the situation in which he finds himself, makes David feel, as he says in verse 7, that he is in prison. He feels constrained and bound in his soul.

One other aspect of David's lament is found in verse 4 where he says that he's looking for someone to come and help him, but no one gives him a passing thought, and no one cares what may happen to him. The NIV that we read tonight says that there is no one at his right hand. The "right" signifies the place where one's witness or legal council would stand during a trial. In other words, David has no one to defend him against his adversaries.

Some might argue that David wrote this Psalm when he was physically alone in the cave, before his men joined him. Perhaps, but loneliness, even when surrounded by others, can be a real thing if we don't feel connected, loved, or cared for by them. It can also occur when we fail to remember the ways God provided for us in the past, like the provision of Jonathan, Saul's son, as such a faithful friend to David. Had David forgotten all about Jonathan?

Being overwhelmed, lonely, and weighed down are feelings that are not just experienced by David, of course. They are experienced by others as well. One such person was Pastor Andrew Brunson, who served as a Presbyterian missionary in Turkey. God enabled him to build a small Christian congregation near the Aegean Sea, and with his wife, Norine, helped refugees from neighboring Syria.

But in July 2016, elements of the Turkish military launched a failed coup. Turkey's President responded by rallying his supporters and cracking down on the military and all aspects of society, which included arresting hundreds of thousands he accused of terrorism, including the Brunsons. Norine was released after 13 days, but Andrew was isolated and shuffled between prisons for two years. He writes, "Being locked up behind a big metal door in a foreign country, hearing the keys turn and the bolt slam for the first time is sobering. It's a sudden loss of control and a plunge into uncertainty. At times during the two years I was imprisoned I felt that I was having a crisis of faith and that I would go insane."

Most of our stories, thankfully, are not what the Brunsons experienced, but there are times when all of us find ourselves in a season of lament, when we feel we are being pursued by the enemy.

We unexpectedly receive news that cancer, once in remission, has returned. We experience unexpected deaths in a family, some of which feel untimely and much too soon. We find ourselves forgotten by family and friends as we struggle with depression. These types of experiences can cause us to express, like David did, that "those things that pursue me...they are too strong for me."

During such challenging times, when it can be hard to find the words to pray, God's Spirit can also lead us to places like the Psalter, and perhaps Psalm 142, to help give us the words we need.

David, as he is led by God's Spirit, does not hold anything back in this Psalm. In fact, he is not ashamed to admit his despair as he uses the word "cry" three times over the course of these seven verses. We see this in verse 1, verse 5, and verse 6. Verse 1, for example, says, "I cry to the Lord. I lift up my voice to the Lord for mercy. I pour out before him my complaint; before him I tell all my trouble."

David is begging God to hear him, to care for him, to see his desperate need, and to rescue him. That's why he pours out, spills out his petitions without holding anything back. "Proper, decorous prayers have their place," Tim Keller writes in a devotional on this Psalm, "but desperate prayers, from the heart, are something God also honors."

Intermingled with David's prayers of lament and petition is something else we should notice in this Psalm: David does not forget who God is and what he can do. We might even call these tidbits confessions of faith.

Look first at verse 3. Although David is overwhelmed and his spirit is growing faint, he knows...he still knows that the Lord is the one who watches over his way, the one who alone knows the way he

should go. It's almost reminiscent of Psalm 139, another Davidic Psalm, which reads: "You have searched me, Lord, and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise. You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways." What a comfort that even when we feel as if we are in the pit of life, we can still rely on God to watch over us and to show us the way to go. He knows our path and our walk in all of its good and all of its bad.

Another confession of faith moment is found in verse 5, where David, led by God's Spirit, cries out: "You, Lord, are my refuge, my portion in the land of the living." Perhaps an even better translation is found in the New Living Translation, where it says, "You are all I really want in my life." As he cries out to God, David finds his place of refuge not in a place (no matter how secure the cave may appear) or a particular circumstance or in material possessions or in his fellow human beings, but in the Lord himself, the one who never fails and the one who will never let him down...and the one who will never let us down either.

The Psalm concludes in verse 7 with one last petition from David, a petition that is filled with hope. He prays that God would free him from his prison, not his prison of bars or stone, of course, but from the prison he feels in his soul. And the purpose of this prayer is not just for freedom, but also to provide him with the opportunities to thank and praise God, to testify to others, and to proclaim the Lord's goodness.

David begins this Psalm with lament; he closes with confidence in the praise yet to come. He begins this Psalm with a song of great isolation; he closes with confidence in the coming companionship and support from the righteous. He begins with a sense of being low and weak; he closes confident in God's future goodness, knowing that God will deal bountifully with him.

A somewhat similar story takes place years later; a story that involves the son of a carpenter and the events that he endures one Friday. Tortured and tried, bloodied and beaten, Jesus, too, is in a prison – not a prison of bars or stone, but the prison that comes from being nailed to a cross and forgotten by others. Lament is heard echoing throughout the countryside as Jesus cries out, using words from the Psalter (Psalm 22:1), "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Lament is also seen in the tears of those who watch his body being laid in another prison, this time a tomb carved from stone.

But the lament does not last for it gives way to confident hope in God when the curtain of the temple is torn in two and Jesus proclaims, "It is finished." The centurion, seeing how Jesus died, proclaims God's goodness when he says, "Surely this was a righteous man."

And even greater yet is when the lament loses its grip at the tomb. The prison bars are broken as the stone is rolled away. "Why do you look for the living among the dead?" the angel says to the women as he proclaims God's goodness. "Jesus is not here. He is risen just as he said."

Dear friends, no matter what type of prison you have faced or perhaps are facing today, emotional, physical, spiritual, know that God, the one who raises people from the dead, is greater than all of it. When your spirit grows faint, he is the one who watches over your way. When you feel isolated and alone, he is the one who is your refuge. And when you feel your troubles are stronger than you can bear, he is the one who is able to carry you through. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

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