

"When it All Hits the Fan: Living and Praying the Psalms"

A sermon preached by Rev. Henry T.C. Sun, Ph.D.

Heritage Presbyterian Church

4 September 2022 - Labor Day, Communion Sunday

1 Samuel 23:24 - 24:2

Psalm 57

1 Samuel 23-24

²⁴So they set out and went to Ziph ahead of Saul. David and his men were in the wilderness of Maon, in the Arabah to the south of Jeshimon. ²⁵Saul and his men went to search for him. When David was told, he went down to the rock and stayed in the wilderness of Maon. When Saul heard that, he pursued David into the wilderness of Maon. ²⁶Saul went on one side of the mountain, and David and his men on the other side of the mountain. David was hurrying to get away from Saul, while Saul and his men were closing in on David and his men to capture them. ²⁷Then a messenger came to Saul, saying, "Hurry and come; for the Philistines have made a raid on the land." ²⁸So Saul stopped pursuing David, and went against the Philistines; therefore that place was called the Rock of Escape. ²⁹David then went up from there, and lived in the strongholds of En-gedi.

¹When Saul returned from following the Philistines, he was told, "David is in the wilderness of En-gedi." ²Then Saul took three thousand chosen men out of all Israel, and went to look for David and his men in the direction of the Rocks of the Wild Goats.

Psalm 57

¹Be merciful to me, O God, be merciful to me, for in you my soul takes refuge; in the shadow of your wings I will take refuge, until the destroying storms pass by.

²I cry to God Most High, to God who fulfills his purpose for me.

³He will send from heaven and save me, he will put to shame those who trample on me.

Selah God will send forth his steadfast love and his faithfulness.

⁴I lie down among lions that greedily devour human prey; their teeth are spears and arrows, their tongues sharp swords.

⁵Be exalted, O God, above the heavens. Let your glory be over all the earth.

⁶They set a net for my steps; my soul was bowed down. They dug a pit in my path, but they have fallen into it themselves. Selah

⁷My heart is steadfast, O God, my heart is steadfast. I will sing and make melody.

⁸Awake, my soul! Awake, O harp and lyre! I will awake the dawn.

⁹I will give thanks to you, O Lord, among the peoples; I will sing praises to you among the nations.

¹⁰For your steadfast love is as high as the heavens; your faithfulness extends to the clouds.

¹¹Be exalted, O God, above the heavens. Let your glory be over all the earth.

I. Introduction

Life has a weird way of not always happening the way we want it to. We have our ups, like our first date, our first kiss, getting married, and our first job promotion. And then we have our downs, when we experience a financial reversal, or a sudden and unexpected decline in our health. Maybe we get divorced, or wrongly accused of some criminal or civil malfeasance. We lose our jobs because of an unjust and untrue allegation. All that kind of stuff happens to people all the time. It would be great if in this life we were always happy, always healthy,

always vibrant, and without a care in the world. But we all know that's not the way life goes. And that's why I'll be doing something for the next few weeks that I've never ever done before: preaching out of the book of Psalms.

(slide2) Why have I never preached out of Psalms before? Because, frankly, so much of the book of Psalms reflects genuinely human and emotional responses to the things that happen to us, both for good and for bad, and I'm not always sure I'm proud of the way I handle them. One famous example is in Psalm 137, where the psalmist closes with the words, "O daughter Babylon, you devastator! Happy shall they be who pay you back what you have done to us! Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!" (vv 8-9). To me, that doesn't sound a lot like "turn the other cheek," or "do not repay evil for evil." And yet I know for a fact that I have sometimes felt that way. I want to see people who are violently abusive towards others, individuals who criminally abuse their power, privilege, and authority brought to justice. I experience a moment of joy when karma strikes and the evildoer gets their just desserts. I like it when hypocrites get called out for their hypocrisy to their shame, no matter which side of the aisle that hypocrisy falls.

In other words, when I read the Psalms, they sometimes remind me of the kind of person I really am in the privacy of my own heart. That's not always the kind of person I want to be in public, and I do try my hardest to keep that private vindictive person under wraps and under control as much as I can. Besides, a highly trained academic like myself majors in the mind, not the emotions, and especially as an Asian-American male, I can't tell you how many times my parents, my culture, and even this American society has told people like me to be like Mr. Spock: Stoic. Logical. Rational and unemotional. To make decisions based on cold hard

objective facts and reasonable logic, and not in the emotional heat of the moment. So for people like me, dealing with my emotional side is hard. Crying is something I rarely do. I prefer a contented smile to an all out whooping and hollering. For someone like me, the raw emotional depth of the Psalter can be hard to handle.

(slide3) Still, there is value in knowing that I'm not the only one that struggles with these kinds of feelings. In a way, the book of Psalms gives us permission to be fully human: to be angry, frustrated, disappointed, full of joy and rejoicing, trusting in the God upon whom we all wait, and celebrating the God who reaches down and blesses us every single day. So let's begin a journey through the Psalms, understanding that they reflect all our human strengths and weaknesses.

II. Pivot to the Psalms

For example, this morning we are going to take a look at Psalm 57. I want to bring a couple of things to your attention before we take a look at the Psalm itself. (slide4) First of all, it is one of the Psalms that has echoes elsewhere in the Psalter. So verses 7-11 are repeated, almost word-for-word, in Psalm 108:1-5, and verse 10 is very close in language and wording to Psalm 36:5 (so, e.g., DeClausse-Walford et al, NICOT 486; Kraus CC 531; Hossfeldt Hermeneia 68; Tate, WBC 75. For the purpose of this sermon series, I am ignoring the versification differences between the Hebrew text and the NRSV translation, citing verses according to the latter. For convenience, I will also refer to the psalmist as "David" in all psalms with the heading דָּוִד).

That is not the only time repetition happens; Psalm 14 is very close in wording to Psalm 53; Psalm 40:13–17 is similarly close in wording to Psalm 70; and Psalm 108 is widely interpreted as a later composition made up of both Psalm 57 and 60 (texts cited by Craigie, WBC 28). Psalm 18 is almost verbally identical to 2 Samuel 22. So while the verbal duplication of Psalm 57 in Psalms 108 and 36 isn't unique, it is a rare enough occurrence to be mentioned.

Second, Psalm 57 is one of only fourteen Psalms that have an introduction which locates the Psalm in the lifetime of David: 3, 7, 18, 30 (DeClaiss-Walford et al, NICOT 13, does not include this psalm in their list, hence their total of thirteen psalms), 34, 51, 52, 54, 56, 57, 59, 60, 63, and 142 (note that many scholars believe that these superscriptions and their historical information was added by a later editor; see, e.g., RISBE 3:1031 ["The majority of the headings probably do not originate with the author of the Psalm"]. Psalm 30 is especially peculiar because its superscription, "A song at the dedication of the temple. Of David," is historically wrong; David didn't dedicate the temple because it was built by his son Solomon; see, e.g., Bratcher-Rayburn UBS Handbook 283; Anderson NCBC 51; Briggs ICC 1:257; Gerstenberger FOTL 133; DeClaiss-Walford et al NICOT 289. Craigie's suggestion that the phrase might mean "song for use of the household (or temple)," WBC 250, is not persuasive). For most of these Psalms, locating the historical referent isn't too challenging, though there are exceptions. Psalm 7 refers to a psalm "which [David] sang to the LORD, concerning Cush, a Benjaminite," and we have no idea what the reference is because no one named "Cush" is found in the entire Old Testament (see, e.g., Bratcher and Reyburn UBS Handbook 65 ["No person by the name of *Cush* is mentioned in the Old Testament"]; Kraus, CC 169 ["The explanatory (redactional reference to the situation providing a recollection of the slander (?) of the Benjaminite Cush is no longer intelligible"]; Craigie WBC 99 ["The incident is not referred to elsewhere explicitly in the Bible"]; DeClaiss-Walford et al NICOT 110 ["The incident that the superscription describes is not attested in the Old Testament"]; Weiser OTL 134n2 ["It is not possible to specify the incident to which the biographical note alludes"; Anderson NCBC 93 ["'Cush the Benjaminite' and the event alluded to in the title of the Psalm are unknown"])). In the specific case of our Psalm, there are two different references to David fleeing to a cave in the Hebrew Bible, one in 1 Samuel 22 and the other in 1 Samuel 24, which is our first reading this morning. It is impossible to be sure which one is being alluded to in the introduction to Psalm 57, and scholars are unsurprisingly divided on that question. There just isn't enough information to be certain, and my choice of 1 Samuel 24 could well be wrong - and perhaps a challenge to Pat because of all the proper names that it includes :).

But that's part of the power of the Psalms. Whichever event Psalm 57 is alluding to, the general outline of the story is the same: David is chased by his enemies into a cave, where he

fears for his life and prays that God might deliver him. So let's see how that works out in the Psalm itself.

(slide5) Psalm 57 divides neatly into four different sections (so Kraus, CC 529; in contrast, Hossfeld Hermeneia 68, Anderson NCBC 425, and Weiser 426 divide the Psalm into two parts, while deClausse-Walford et al NICOT 486 and Gerstenberger FOTL 229 divide it into eight parts) which can be outlined as follows:

Verse 1: David's cry for help;

Verses 2-5: a description of the praying, the prayers, and the situation;

Verse 6: the certainty of being heard;

Verses 7-11: assertions that express trust and thanks

Verse 1 opens the psalm with David's cry for help to God: "Be merciful to me, O God, be merciful to me (חַנּוּנִי אֱלֹהִים חַנּוּנִי; interestingly, the imperative form חַנּוּנִי occurs only in the book of Psalms in the Hebrew Bible [MT Ps 4:2; 6:3; 25:16; 26:11; 27:7; 30:11; 31:10; 41:5, 11; 51:3; 56:2; 57:2; 86:3, 16; 119:29, 58, 132])."

Elsewhere, that same word is translated "Be gracious to me" (e.g., Psalm 4:1; 6:2; 25:16; 26:11; 27:7; 30:10; 31:10; 41:5, 10; 56:2; 86:3, 16; 119:58, 132; only Psalm 51:1 translates it "Have mercy on me"), but the sense is the same (see, e.g., TDOT 5:24 ["it can refer to ordinary acceptance or kindness, or else favor of a special nature, such as pity, mercy, or generosity"] and the specific discussion of the Hebrew phrase on page 32]). The psalmist is in desperate need of

God's help in his life, whether the form of God's help is divine mercy or diving grace. That cry for help is then followed by David's affirmation that "in you my soul takes refuge, in the shadow of your wings I will take refuge, until the destroying storms pass by." It is noteworthy that the verbs "be merciful" and "take refuge" are each repeated twice in this opening verse

(Gersentberger, FOTL 230, rightly notes that "A double entreaty for mercy ... is rare in the Psalms. It is comparable to other urgent and repetitious calls, such as Psalm 22:2 [RSV 1], 'my God, my God,' and seemingly more impressive in liturgical discourse than the ordinary chain of pleas," citing Ps 123:3 as a second example). This is a rhetorical device that shows us where

the emphasis of David's prayer lies: in the request for God's mercy, which is under God's control, and in David's decision to take refuge in God, which is under David's control.

Moreover, the fact that David is asking for mercy from God reminds us that we rarely ask for mercy, for grace, for assistance of any kind from someone who is unable to provide it. For example, my students and occasionally the parents of my students ask me for grace and mercy all the time. Perhaps they are going to be out of town for a week; can they turn in their homework when they get back? Or perhaps they are having some mental health issues; can their homework be reduced? They ask that of me because they know I am in a position to say yes to their request. And if I am not in a position to grant their request, as when a parent told me that their student would not be wearing a mask in class despite our school district's requirement that masks be worn indoors, as in classrooms or offices? Then I send them to the individuals who can grant their request, my principal or the district office.

The same dynamic is at play here. David is asking for mercy because he knows that God is able to say yes to his request. And while that doesn't mean that David knows for sure that God will say yes to his request this time, David is confident that God will grant him the mercy he is requesting. How do we know that? By David's decision to take refuge in God. This is not an impulsive act in the heat of the moment; David is determined to stay there "until the destroying storms pass (יַעֲבֹר הַיּוֹת); Hossfeld Hermeneia 67 notes that the construction of a plural noun with a singular subject is "unusual but not unprecedented"; see, e.g., GKC §145.o.7.a, which adduces the similar construction in Deut 32:35; 1 Kgs 11:3a; Isa 8:8; Jer 13:18; Mic 2:6; and Ps 57:2)." That is obviously not a literal description of a literal storm, but a metaphorical one that describes the difficult situation he finds himself in: hiding in a cave, being pursued by the king of Israel who has the power of the Israelite army at his command, and

whose life is therefore in mortal danger every time he falls asleep and every morning that he awakens again. If that's not the perfect storm of potential destruction, I don't know what is.

(slide6) That would already be enough to make this Psalm one that is worth reading again and again, but of course the psalm doesn't end with verse 1! If verse 1 is an address to God, then verses 2-3 are an address to the community of faith because God is now being spoken of in the third person, not the second. These verses reinforce the confidence that David has in God's ability and willingness to extend mercy to him. Now David says, "I cry to God Most High (אֱלֹהִים עֲלִיּוֹן), to God who fulfills his purpose for me. He *will* send from heaven and save me, he *will* put to shame those who trample on me. God *will* send forth his steadfast love (חֶסֶד) and his faithfulness (אֱמֻנָה)." The threefold repetition of "*will* send... *will* put to shame... *will* send forth" is, like the twofold repetition in verse 1, a rhetorical device that emphasizes David's trust in God - not just that God *can* do these things, but that God *will* do these things. And as I mentioned at the beginning of the sermon, David's trust is all too human - David *expects* God to "put to shame (חָרַף שָׂאֲפֵי) those who trample on me" (note that this phrase is grammatically ambiguous since the participle could function as the subject of the verb instead of its object. Hence, Kraus CC 528 translates "Let them be ashamed who seek my life"; Hossfeld Hermeneia 67 translates "those who mock and snap at me"; Tate WBC 72 translates "he will challenge whoever hounds me"). As in Psalm 137, this isn't exactly "turn the other cheek," is it. But it is highly realistic. David is being pursued by a ruthless monarch for no good reason other than Saul's petty and vindictive nature. Who wouldn't want such an adversary to be "put to shame"? I know I would.

(slide7) Verses 4 and 6 return to David's current situation, this time using a hunting metaphor instead of an actual description of his situation: "I lie down among lions that greedily devour human prey; their teeth are spears and arrows, their tongues sharp swords.... They *set* a

net for my stops; my soul *was bowed down*. They *dug* a pit in my path, but they *have fallen* into it themselves." That is an excellent illustration of how hunters went about hunting in antiquity. They dug a hole, covered it with some kind of netting, and then covered the netting with leaves, branches, grass, and other stuff to make it blend in with the rest of the landscape. And then they waited for the poor animal to step into the trap and to fall into the hole. At that point, it would be child's play to kill the beast and feed the family. But we shouldn't overlook how the description of the situation has changed. Previously, David was asking for God's mercy which had not yet been given to him, he was proclaiming what *will* happen at some point in the future but hadn't happened yet. In these verses he is describing something that has already taken place in the past. Beth Tanner puts it this way: "the very trap that the enemies set ~~for the one praying~~ is the same *pit* those enemies fall into themselves.... the enemies are done, finished. Their very own traps did them in" (DeClaiss-Walford et al NICOT 489 along with Weiser OTL 427-28 and Anderson NCBC 428; others see this as a so-called "prophetic perfect," in which a future event is described as something that has already happened [so Tate WBC 79; Kraus CC 531; Hossfeld Hermeneia 74], but that interpretation is less likely because all the verbal forms in MT verse 7 are perfects [הָכִינוּ ... קָרוּ ... נָפְלוּ]).

(**slide8**) So it should not be surprising that with verse 7 the tone of the Psalm changes from the hopeful expectation of God's extended mercy to the joyous celebration of the mercy that God has granted, and that David returns to addressing God in the second person, as he did in verse 1. Now, David speaks of singing and making melody in verse 7. He awakens himself and his musical instruments with the intention of awakening the dawn, a metaphor for doing something public in the pre-dawn hours that will accompany the sunrise (so Bratcher-Reyburn UBS Handbook 513 ["he will arise before dawn and, so to speak, wake up the sun, instead of letting the sun wake him up"]; so also Hossfeld Hermeneia 74; Anderson NCBC 429). That is a very different attitude from the one which finds

David seeking refuge under God's wings and praying for mercy. And just how does David propose to wake up the dawn? By "[giving] thanks to you, O Lord, among the peoples"; by ["singing] praises to you among the nations" (verse 9) as his grateful celebration of his deliverance from the danger set before him by Saul. And notice that David is not only celebrating his deliverance; he is also celebrating God's steadfast love which is "as high as the heavens," God's faithfulness which "extends to the clouds." And the Psalm comes to an end with the prayer, "Be exalted, O God, above the heavens. Let your glory be over all the earth" in verse 11.

III. Pivot to today

I trust that this psalm, and others like it, can be a source of confidence for everyone in the community of faith that is struggling with a difficult situation, even if our situations do not rise to the level of a political monarch going after us with all the resources at his or her disposal in order to execute a petty and vindictive agenda. We all have in our past, and many of us will in the days and months to come, find ourselves in dangerous and destructive storms. In such a situation, let's follow the example set for us by David. Let's trust in God's providential grace and mercy, and stay under God's wings, not losing hope when an answer does not come when we'd like it to. Let's expect that God will grant us his grace and his mercy in God's own timing, and rejoice when that time comes. It is only human to wonder when that will happen. And when things don't turn out the way we want them to, it is easy to begin to lose faith in God. That has happened to me numerous times in my walk with God. Why didn't God grant me his mercy and his grace when my first marriage ended in divorce? Why didn't God grant my older brother Steven his mercy and his grace when he fell into a coma in December, stayed in that

coma for 10 months, and eventually passed on to his eternal reward on September 11, 2009? I am confident that we have all prayed for God's mercy and God's grace at one time or another and not gotten the answer that we wanted.

But despite these moments of doubt, I have learned to keep my trust and hope in God. Too many times, God has answered my prayers for mercy and grace. Too many times, I have gotten through a situation with the help of God and the support of the community of faith. Especially when my prayers went unanswered, the community of faith was there to help me through my grief. To help me through my disappointment. To walk with me when I wondered why God didn't do what I wanted God to do. David rejoiced with the community of faith in verses 7-11. Let's celebrate when our prayers are answered, and support each other when they are not.

Because that's what the *community* of faith is all about. It is not primarily about the rhetorical eloquence and the academic brilliance of my preaching. There are churches that struggle to fill their pulpits every week because they are small in number and on a highly limited budget. But such churches are no less communities of faith than we are. It is not primarily about the emotional highs we get from our music, or the emotional satisfaction we receive when we feed the hungry, when we support the homeless, or when we seek to meet the needs of our wider community. There are churches that cannot worship publicly because doing so is a crime against the state. But they aren't any less of a community of faith than we are. There are churches that have praise bands and multiple services, churches that can do more than we can do because they have a larger membership or a bigger budget than we have. But we are not any less of a community of faith than they are.

(slide8) What makes a church a community of faith, what ties all of these different churches together is the fact that we are all worshiping the God who created us, the One who saved us through the death and resurrection of Jesus, the One who grants us mercy and grace when we need it and when we ask for it. We are all rejoicing with those who rejoice when they receive the mercy and grace that they need. We are all supporting those who mourn when they don't receive the mercy and grace that they request. Despite our disagreements with each other, our differences of opinion with each other, our different preferences for this thing or that thing. We are all in this journey of faith *together*, so together let's trust in God, pray for God's mercy and grace, and celebrate and support one another as their circumstances demand.

Hallelujah! And amen.