

Psalm 55

“The Lord Will Sustain You”

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Pentecost Season

In Hebrews 13:4, the apostle commands his readers with these words:
“Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those are mistreated, since you also are in the body.”

Don't just remember those brothers and sisters in Christ who are in prison, the apostle is saying, but remember them as though you were actually imprisoned with them. And do the same for those siblings in Christ who are mistreated in any way.

The apostle Paul writes in a very similar manner in Romans 12, where he instructs the church, saying, “We, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another...Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.”

Or, as Paul puts it again in 1 Corinthians 12, “There are many parts, yet one body...if one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.”

Essentially, what these passages in Hebrews and Romans and 1 Corinthians are telling us is that to be a Christian person means that you must, as an expression of your union with Jesus, live in organic communion with all other Christian persons.

If one member of the body is suffering, you're not just called to feel sorry for them, you're called to enter into that suffering emotionally and spiritually as though it were actually your own experience, as you actually are suffering as they are.

And likewise, if another member of the body is rejoicing, you are called to enter into their joy with them.

This mutuality of experience within the body is a fundamental aspect of the Christian ethical life, but it raises the question - how do we actually *do* this?

If I've never been imprisoned, if I've never been abused, if I've never been assaulted, if I've never been betrayed, if I've never experienced homelessness or starvation or systematic persecution, how can I enter into the experience of my brother or my sister who is experiencing those things?

This beloved, is one of the reasons why God has given us the psalms.

The psalms are a book of prayers written for us in the first person, so we can pray them on our own lips, as though the situations described were actually happening to *us*.

And the psalms are written out of all kinds of experiences - the psalmists pray to God in the midst of persecution, betrayal, violence, abuse, confusion, disappointment, depression, fear, anger, and in every circumstance they give us a way to enter into those experiences ourselves - to emotionally and spiritually embrace the suffering of others with whom we dwell in the body - and thus to fulfill the exhortations of the apostles.

So what do you do if you come to a psalm that describes an experience you haven't personally shared?

You enter into that psalm and take it on your lips, seeing it as an opportunity to do what the apostles instruct us to do - to weep with those who weep, to rejoice with those who rejoice, to remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body.

I invite you now to listen carefully to God's holy and inerrant word as it comes to us from Psalm 55, which is printed for you on the back of your order of worship.

Psalm 55

To the choirmaster: with stringed instruments. A Maskil of David.

*1 Give ear to my prayer, O God,
and hide not yourself from my plea for mercy!*

*2 Attend to me, and answer me;
I am restless in my complaint and I moan,*

*3 because of the noise of the enemy,
because of the oppression of the wicked.*

*For they drop trouble upon me,
and in anger they bear a grudge against me.*

*4 My heart is in anguish within me;
the terrors of death have fallen upon me.*

*5 Fear and trembling come upon me,
and horror overwhelms me.*

*6 And I say, "Oh, that I had wings like a dove!
I would fly away and be at rest;*

*7 yes, I would wander far away;
I would lodge in the wilderness; Selah*

*8 I would hurry to find a shelter
from the raging wind and tempest."*

*9 Destroy, O Lord, divide their tongues;
for I see violence and strife in the city.*

*10 Day and night they go around it
on its walls,
and iniquity and trouble are within it;*

11 *ruin is in its midst;
oppression and fraud
do not depart from its marketplace.*

12 *For it is not an enemy who taunts me—
then I could bear it;
it is not an adversary who deals insolently with me—
then I could hide from him.*

13 *But it is you, a man, my equal,
my companion, my familiar friend.*

14 *We used to take sweet counsel together;
within God's house we walked in the throng.*

15 *Let death steal over them;
let them go down to Sheol alive;
for evil is in their dwelling place and in their heart.*

16 *But I call to God,
and the LORD will save me.*

17 *Evening and morning and at noon
I utter my complaint and moan,
and he hears my voice.*

18 *He redeems my soul in safety
from the battle that I wage,
for many are arrayed against me.*

19 *God will give ear and humble them,
he who is enthroned from of old, Selah
because they do not change
and do not fear God.*

20 *My companion stretched out his hand against his friends;
he violated his covenant.*

*21 His speech was smooth as butter,
yet war was in his heart;
his words were softer than oil,
yet they were drawn swords.*

*22 Cast your burden on the LORD,
and he will sustain you;
he will never permit
the righteous to be moved.*

*23 But you, O God, will cast them down
into the pit of destruction;
men of blood and treachery
shall not live out half their days.
But I will trust in you.*

Thus far the reading of God's word. It is absolutely true, and it is given to you because your Father in Heaven loves you.

*Blessed Lord, who caused all the holy Scriptures to be written for our learning:
Grant us so to hear this portion of your word, and to read, mark, learn, and
inwardly digest these words, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed
hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ; who
lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.*

Psalm 55 begins a section of the psalter where six consecutive psalms - psalm 55-60 each include a strong emphasis on asking God to judge and even destroy the wicked.

In our psalm today, David says about the wicked:

"Let death steal over them; let them go down to Sheol alive; for evil is in their dwelling place and in their heart."

“You, O God,” David says, “Will cast them down into the pit of destruction.”

In Psalm 56, David entreats God, “In wrath cast down the peoples, O God!”

In Psalm 57, he says, “God will put to shame him who tramples on me.”

In Psalm 58, David boldly prays to God, “Let the wicked vanish like water that runs away, let them be like the snail that dissolves into slime.”

In Psalm 59, David says, “Rouse yourself to punish the nations; spare none of those who treacherously plot evil.”

In Psalm 60, David proclaims, “With God we shall do valiantly; it is he who will tread down all our foes.”

This emphasis on asking God to judge the wicked and even bring about their destruction is not limited to this section of the psalter, of course.

These kind of sentiments appear all over the place in the psalms, and one could make the argument that asking God to judge the wicked is one of the primary emphases of the psalms as a whole.

Now I don't think there's any doubt that this kind of language creates some amount of tension with our sort of intuitive modern sensibilities.

It's one thing to acknowledge that God actually does judge the wicked as an abstract possibility, but for us to plead with God to do it - to act in history to judge the wicked and bring about their destruction? And for this prayer to be a righteous prayer for us to pray? That doesn't fit our natural inclinations about what it means to be spiritual or holy.

But beloved, where tension exists between our natural inclinations and the Scriptures, it is our natural inclinations that must be conformed to the Scriptures, not the other way around.

And the unavoidable reality is that our psalm this morning, and many of the psalms in the psalter teach us to pray for God to judge the wicked.

To do so is not arrogant. It is not callous. It is holy. And we will continue to wrestle with the holiness of these prayers in the weeks to come.

Our psalm this morning is a long one, but it's worth taking a few minutes to look at the flow of the argument that it makes.

The Psalm begins in verse 1-2 as as the Psalmist asks for God to hear his prayer.

*1 Give ear to my prayer, O God,
and hide not yourself from my plea for mercy!*

*2 Attend to me, and answer me;
I am restless in my complaint and I moan, David says.*

But why does Psalmist need for the Lord to hear his prayer?

As he explains in verse 3, it is because of the oppression of the wicked. He depicts the wicked as dropping trouble on him, as though they fall from the sky to plague and afflict him.

Then, in verses 4-8, the psalmist describes the horror he feels at what is happening to him.

He says that his heart is in anguish. That the terrors of death have fallen upon him. Fear has overwhelmed him.

And he desires, above all things, to escape from his situation.

The psalmist writes:

6 *“Oh, that I had wings like a dove!
I would fly away and be at rest;
7 yes, I would wander far away;
I would lodge in the wilderness;
8 I would hurry to find a shelter
from the raging wind and tempest.”*

If it was up to him, this is what the Psalmist would want. Just to be taken out of the place that he is in - the anguish of his soul, the fear that he feels, the confusion and terror. He just wants to be delivered from all that. Put a pin in that thought - it's important.

In verses 9-15, the psalmist then cries out to the Lord about the wicked who are set against him.

He describes their violence - the way in which they seem to have the upper hand, ruling the city, bringing trouble and oppression.

He details how those who now have become his enemies were once his friends. How he trusted them, and broke bread with them - but now they have turned against him.

Then, he prays for God to act: 15 *Let death steal over them;
let them go down to Sheol alive;
for evil is in their dwelling place and in their heart.*

Then, in verses 16-21, the psalmist assures himself that God will hear his prayers. I call to God, he says, and the LORD will save me. Evening and morning and at noon I utter my complaint and moan, and he hears my voice.

Then, in verse 22, at the end of the psalm, the Psalmist describes the promise that he is clinging to.

*22 Cast your burden on the LORD,
and he will sustain you;
he will never permit
the righteous to be moved.*

This, I think, is a fascinating movement in the psalm, and one that we must pay attention to.

Earlier in the psalm, the psalmist was saying that he wanted to escape his situation.

*6 "Oh, that I had wings like a dove!
I would fly away and be at rest;
7 yes, I would wander far away;
I would lodge in the wilderness;
8 I would hurry to find a shelter
from the raging wind and tempest."*

And that's an understandable desire. Who among us, finding ourselves in a situation where we're afraid and overwhelmed doesn't want that? We want to get away from the difficulty and the discomfort. We want to fly away and be at rest. We just want to go out and find a safe, isolated spot where no one can hurt us.

But as the psalmist wrestles in the rest of the psalm with the truth of God's faithfulness, with the promise that God hears him, with the reality that God will, in his own good time, judge the wicked and overturn evil, by the end of the psalm he changes his tune. Instead of desiring to escape, he says:

*22 Cast your burden on the LORD,
and he will sustain you;
he will never permit
the righteous to be moved.*

That movement, from Oh, that I had wings like a dove, so that I could fly away to Cast your burden on the Lord and he will sustain you, is profound.

It's moving from believing that what I need is to somehow escape my situation to trusting that God is with me in my situation and he will take care of me in this place.

And that is the movement of faith. That is the movement of mature trust in the Lord and his kindness and love for us.

Friends, I don't know what situation you find yourself in this morning. But I'm guessing at least some of us are longing for escape.

And it's so easy to look for ways out, to search for ways to distract ourselves or turn off our emotions or just to disappear from the hard things that we find ourselves in the midst of.

But beloved, what you need to see about this verse at the end of the psalm is that the psalmist is giving us a promise here.

Cast your burden on the LORD, he says. Do that, and this is what God will do in return.

*Cast your burden on the LORD,
and he will sustain you;
he will never permit
the righteous to be moved.*

I mean, that's a promise right there.

It's a promise very like the one that Peter gives in our epistle reading this morning.

9 Resist [the Devil], firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world. 10 And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you. 11 To him be the dominion forever and ever. Amen.

The promise of the psalmist, and the promise of Peter isn't that the Lord will pull us out of whatever crisis we find ourselves in, whatever overwhelming situation.

The promise is that the Lord will sustain us in that place. That he will be with us. That he will, in his good time, deliver us - but not that he will deliver us by taking us out.

Rather, that he will deliver us, he will save us, by making us firm and steadfast, immovable — for indeed, he will never permit the righteous to be moved.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.