

Psalm 59

“God Is My Refuge & My Fortress”

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Pentecost Season

Listen now to God’s word from Psalm 59, which is printed on the back of your order of worship if you’d like to read along.

Psalm 59

To the choirmaster: according to Do Not Destroy. A Miktam of David, when Saul sent men to watch his house in order to kill him.

*1 Deliver me from my enemies, O my God;
protect me from those who rise up against me;
2 deliver me from those who work evil,
and save me from bloodthirsty men.*

*3 For behold, they lie in wait for my life;
fierce men stir up strife against me.
For no transgression or sin of mine, O Lord,
4 for no fault of mine, they run and make ready.
Awake, come to meet me, and see!*

*5 You, Lord God of hosts, are God of Israel.
Rouse yourself to punish all the nations;
spare none of those who treacherously plot evil. Selah*

*6 Each evening they come back,
howling like dogs
and prowling about the city.*

*7 There they are, bellowing with their mouths
with swords in their lips—
for “Who,” they think, “will hear us?”*

- 8 But you, O Lord, laugh at them;
you hold all the nations in derision.
- 9 O my Strength, I will watch for you,
for you, O God, are my fortress.
- 10 My God in his steadfast love will meet me;
God will let me look in triumph on my enemies.
- 11 Kill them not, lest my people forget;
make them totter by your power and bring them down,
O Lord, our shield!
- 12 For the sin of their mouths, the words of their lips,
let them be trapped in their pride.
For the cursing and lies that they utter,
13 consume them in wrath;
consume them till they are no more,
that they may know that God rules over Jacob
to the ends of the earth. Selah
- 14 Each evening they come back,
howling like dogs
and prowling about the city.
- 15 They wander about for food
and growl if they do not get their fill.
- 16 But I will sing of your strength;
I will sing aloud of your steadfast love in the morning.
For you have been to me a fortress
and a refuge in the day of my distress.
- 17 O my Strength, I will sing praises to you,
for you, O God, are my fortress,
the God who shows me steadfast love.

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.

One of the most precious pieces of theological writing ever produced by the church is question #1 of the Heidelberg Catechism. We just recited it a few minutes ago. Let me read it to you again.

Q: What is your only comfort in life and in death?

A: My only comfort in all things is that I am not my own, but belong: body and soul, in life and in death, to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ. He has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood, and has set me free from the tyranny of the devil. He also watches over me in such a way that not a hair can fall from my head without the will of my Father in heaven: in fact, all things must work together for my salvation. Because I belong to him, Christ, by his Holy Spirit, assures me of eternal life and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him. Amen!

Heidelberg #1 is such a personal question. It doesn't beat around the bush. It just goes straight to our hearts and lays them open.

What is it that gives you comfort, Heidelberg asks? What is it that gives you confidence and hope and joy and peace?

And notice what it doesn't say in its answer to the question - what is it that gives me comfort?

It doesn't say "the right person in the white house." It doesn't say "a strong economy." It doesn't say, "enough money in my bank account to make sure I'll always have the things my family needs."

It doesn't say my comfort is "good health." It doesn't say my comfort is that "no one I love will ever die." It doesn't say my comfort is "an successful marriage."

It doesn't say "fulfilling friendships" or "not being lonely." It doesn't say "happy and well-adjusted children." It doesn't say my comfort is "success and fulfillment in my work." It doesn't say my comfort is "all my hard work and sacrifice is fully appreciated."

No, finding our comfort, our confidence, our hope in our outward circumstances leads disappointment 100% of the time, because those outward circumstances are always waxing and waning, always changing, even if we somehow get all our outward circumstances in a place where we think "great - that's perfect" - it never lasts.

And we all know what that disappointment feels like. Because we're familiar with it.

All of us are intimately acquainted with what happens when we look for our comfort in our health or our relationships or our success or whatever it is, and the disappointment that comes when things fall apart, as they inevitably do.

And in those moments when things change, when things fall apart, when our life moves in a way that is different than what we thought we had a right to hope for, it's so easy to put that disappointment on God. As though, in all the changes in the circumstances our lives, God has someone given us a raw deal or let us down or failed to keep his promises to us.

But what if God has not actually promised all those things?

What if God has actually only promised to give us one circumstance in our life that doesn't change, that will never change, that can't change - and that one solitary, unchanging circumstance is the only where our comfort can actually be found?

That one unchanging circumstance that is given to us, of course, is our union with Christ.

God, by his Spirit, has joined and sealed us to his Son. Our lives are hidden with Christ in God. That doesn't change, even when everything else does.

Not even death can take away our union with Christ, because our bodies, though they die, remain united to Jesus, even in the grave.

Our only comfort, in life and in death, as the Heidelberg puts it, is that we belong to Jesus.

That we belong to Jesus - the risen Son of God who has himself conquered sin, death and Satan - is the circumstance that doesn't change, that can't change, that will never change - and that, by faith, is where our only comfort lies.

And this reality is fully on display in our fascinating psalm this morning.

The context of Psalm 59 is, of course, deeply important for understanding its meaning.

This psalm comes out of a time when David's outward circumstances were changing rapidly, and not for the better. In fact, you could say that his life was quickly falling apart.

You see, after David defeated Goliath and won a great battle for Israel against the Philistines, he was elevated from anonymity to fame. Overnight, he became wealthy and powerful and successful beyond his wildest dreams.

One day David is the youngest son of a middling family from Bethlehem bringing his older brothers food at the battle field, and the next day, all the women of Israel are singing his name. *His name.*

In quick succession, David is made a commander of Israel's armies, married to the daughter of the king, given a home and a place at court, and wealth besides.

And things are pretty good for a couple of years. David flourishes.

But then, as we heard from 1 Samuel 19 earlier this morning, things begin to change. All that God had given David, he now takes away.

Saul turns against him, and in a fit of anger, tries to kill David with a spear. He fails, and David escapes. Then, that very night, Saul sends his soldiers to surround David's home so that they can kill him in the morning. Remember, just before this episode, David was commanding these soldiers. And now the very same men who followed him in battle are ready to kill him.

And so David escapes out of a window and leaves town. He escapes with his life, but he loses literally everything else.

In one night, David loses everything. He loses his wife. He loses his home. He loses his possessions. He loses his position. He loses his sense of security and safety. He loses his friends.

But, even in the midst of all of that, David does not lose his comfort or his hope or his joy, because the only circumstance that ultimately matters remains the same - God remains his strength and his fortress even in the midst of all these things.

Let me show you what I mean.

Our psalm this morning breaks easily into two parts - verses 1-10 and verses 11-17.

And both parts follow the same pattern - the repetition is striking.

First, a series of petitions in verses 1-5 and a similar series of petitions in verses 11-13. Second, a poetic description of his enemies in verses 6-7 and 14-15. And finally, an assertion of comfort and hope with many of the same elements in verses 8-10 and 16-17.

So the pattern - petitions, description of enemies, assertion of hope and confidence repeats itself twice. Let's walk through it briefly.

In verses 1-5, David petitions God to save him from his enemies. This section is full of imperatives. David is asking God to intervene in his time of crisis and need.

Deliver me from my enemies! David says in verse 1. Protect me from those who rise up against me!

Awake, O God, come to meet me, David says in verse 4. And in verse 5, he says, Rouse yourself - don't spare any of those who treacherously plot evil.

This same emphasis shows up in verses 11 - 13. Here we see another series of petitions where David asks God to deliver him by bringing down his enemies.

And in verses 6-7 and 14-15, following those petitions, we have David describing his enemies with almost the same language. In fact, verses 6 and 14 are identical. David compares his enemies to wild dogs, saying: *"Every evening they come back, howling like dogs, and prowling about the city."*

And then, in verses 9-10 and 16-17, we have what I think is the most interesting part of the psalm - the place where David expresses with striking boldness his confidence and hope in God - in the midst of his current situation, which, objectively speaking, is pretty horrible.

Here's what David writes.

In verses 9-10:

9 *O my Strength, I will watch for you,
for you, O God, are my fortress.*
10 *My God in his steadfast love will meet me;
God will let me look in triumph on my enemies.*

And then, in verses 16-17, as he concludes the psalm:

16 *But I will sing of your strength;
I will sing aloud of your steadfast love in the morning.
For you have been to me a fortress
and a refuge in the day of my distress.*
17 *O my Strength, I will sing praises to you,
for you, O God, are my fortress,
the God who shows me steadfast love.*

In these verses, David emphasizes three things in his relationship to God, even as soldiers surround his house to threaten his life, even as he is in the process of losing all that God has given him.

First, he calls God his “strength.”

Second, he describes the Lord as his “fortress.”

Third, he identifies God as the one who shows him, even in the midst of all these things, his “Hesed,” his steadfast love.

It’s striking the way that David uses the language of strength here. He doesn’t just describe God as his strength. He refers to God in direct address, and says twice: “O my Strength,” as though saying “my strength” is another name for God.

There’s such deep intimacy here in addressing God in this way.

Think about that - what if you addressed God with those words? What if, sometimes, instead of beginning your prayers with the words, “Almighty God,” or “Heavenly Father,” you simply addressed him as “O my Strength”?

That’s language of dependence. That’s language of need. That’s language of intimacy.

It’s ironic, in a way, that David describes God as his “Fortress” and his “refuge” in the situation he finds himself.

His earthly fortress, his home, is surrounded by soldiers. His home is no longer a place of safety or refuge - it is a death trap.

But still, even though the safety of his own home is being stripped from him, David calls God his fortress and his refuge - he recognizes that no matter what happens to his earthly fortress, God remains his safe place, his tower, his refuge.

And finally, David identifies this place where he is losing all that he has been given as the place where he knows God's steadfast love.

Noticeably, he doesn't refer to God's love here in some abstract way.

In verse 10, he says, "My God in his steadfast love will meet me," and in verse 17, he says, you are the "God who shows me steadfast love."

David isn't reflecting back on the good times in his life and holding on to them as though that is the evidence of God's steadfast love. No, he's saying God's steadfast love being shown to him now, in this place, as he loses his position, his power, his family, his home.

Even in this place, David claims, God is meeting him and showing him his steadfast love.

One thing I think is fascinating here, of course, is that the particular losses David is experiencing in this moment wouldn't have happened at all if God had not elevated him.

If God had not raised him up, if God have not given him a position of influence and wealth and a home and a wife, David wouldn't, in this moment, be feeling the pain of losing it all.

The difficult circumstances wouldn't have been there if God hadn't given him the good circumstances.

Yet, in this moment, David's cry to God is not wishing that God had just left him be, but he proclaims God's steadfast love - which was present before he was raised up and is there in his time of loss now.

And remember, God is doing all of this.

God is lifting David up, and God is bringing David down.

And in all these changes in David's outward circumstances, God is teaching David that his fundamental circumstance, his fundamental situation hasn't changed at all.

In fact, in the midst of these changes, this present loss, God is teaching David to say, in a way that he wouldn't have said before — God is my strength, God is my fortress, God is the one who shows me steadfast, unchangeable love.

Or, to put it another way, God is using the changes in David's life, the losses he is experiencing to teach David to say, in a new and deeper way: *My only comfort in all things is that I am not my own, but belong: body and soul, in life and in death, to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ.*

And I would suggest, beloved, that is exactly what God is doing in your life as well.

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