

PRAISE FROM A CAVE - PSALM 57

LIFE OF DAVID IN THE PSALMS #4

A derrick is an apparatus that hoists or moves heavy weights. But few construction engineers today remember that the derricks they use to make their jobs so much easier are named after a man who lived in the 17th century named Godfrey Derrick. Godfrey was London's hangman. It was his job to execute prisoners who had been condemned to capital punishment. And he performed his job with a professional efficiency unknown before by others in his office.

You see, before Godfrey was commissioned hangman, the gallows at Tyburn which today would be the northeast corner of Hyde Park was a rather simple tripod. 3 long legs were arranged so that a rope could be suspended where their tops joined. It was Godfrey Derrick who redesigned the gallows. He fixed a long beam horizontally from the top of a platform so that the noose could be moved out to the end of the beam. Now prisoners could be hanged without the inconvenience of having the legs of the gallows getting in the way and with better visibility for the crowds that inevitably gathered in the park to witness the execution. No wonder the people of London soon were calling the Tyburn gallows *the derrick* in honor of its inventor.

But it was on those gallows that Godfrey Derrick had designed that a great irony of justice was to occur. For it had only been a few months before Derrick had become London's hangman that he had been in a treacherous position himself.

Godfrey had been arrested in the French city of Calais on a charge of rape. He had been tried and convicted in court and sentenced to be hanged. Desperate to

save his own life, Derrick had contacted the British authorities to intercede on his behalf. Robert, the Earl of Essex, had taken pity upon him. Robert had traveled to Calais and used his influence to have Derrick's sentence commuted. Godfrey Derrick was released from prison and sent back to England where he interestingly became London's hangman. But Derrick had just been at his new position for a little more than a year when he was given what must have been his most difficult assignment. Robert, Earl of Essex, had fallen from grace and was condemned to be hanged by the King. Here was the man who had saved his neck - but now Godfrey Derrick was asked to take his life. If he was disturbed by the task, he hid it well. For history records that with his usual brisk efficiency, Godfrey Derrick strung up the Earl of Essex and took his life.

What an irony! One man who saves another from the hangman's noose only to be executed by the very person he saved. What an injustice! One man who risks a great deal to save another who was convicted of a crime only to be executed as an innocent man. But this was not the first time that such an irony and injustice occurred.

What are most disturbing in studying the early life of David are the many injustices he suffered. Here was a young man who was as loyal a subject to King Saul as anyone could have been. Here was a young man who had risked his life for his country going out alone to duel the giant Goliath. Here was a young man who had sacrificed for the wellbeing of the King, being away from home for long periods of time so that he could be the court musician to soothe Saul's troubled spirit. Any light that Israel had as a nation at this time was due to David. Without

David's confrontation with Goliath, the Israelites would have been under the complete domination of the Philistines. Saul wouldn't have really been a king at all in practical reality. He would have just been a puppet under Philistine control. The fact that Saul had any autonomy at all and that Israel as a nation had any hope at all was due to David's courage and spirit. David had saved Saul's life and kingship. But, amazingly, despite all that David had done for Saul, the King of Israel was obsessed with the young man's destruction.

We have been studying the life of David through the Psalms that he wrote during these past Summer Sundays. This week, we want to look at one of the major lessons that David learned during his long exile from the King's palace and from his home. For Saul's obsession to kill David became so severe that David had to run for his life. He had to flee to the caves of Adullam and live the life of a fugitive and vagabond. His was certainly a life of inconvenience at best and fearful apprehension at worst. There were periods of time when Saul just left him alone because there were more pressing matters for him to consider. But there were also times when Saul led his armies out to search for him with the orders to kill him on sight. Throughout this decade of trial in his life, however, David grew in his character and in his military savvy and in his walk with the Lord.

We want to look at one of the Psalms that David wrote from a cave. It is Psalm 57. This psalm is representative of the several psalms that David wrote under those similar conditions for it reveals the reality of both his dangerous situation as well as his trust in the Lord.

Psalm 57 falls naturally into 3 sections: first there is a cry for help as David

calls upon the Lord to save him in his time of need. Then David speaks of a crisis that was harmful to him. And finally, there is a confession of hope in the Lord as David renews his trust in God even in the midst of his difficulties.

As we look at this Psalm together, we need to remind ourselves that David is a godly model for facing dangerous situations. Now it is true that none of us has a powerful person stalking us with a large army in an attempt to take our lives. But we all face dangerous situations in life. Our dangerous situation might be a health problem, or it might be fellow students at school that have it in for us, or it might be a tenuous work environment, or it might be an explosive family powder-keg. Most of us are tempted to go to one of two extremes in handling dangerous situations - we either become overwhelmed by the danger and paralyzed by fear so that we can't think or react in a constructive manner or we go into denial just pretending that the dangerous situation doesn't exist and just wait for the inevitable to occur. But as we study this Psalm together, I want you to especially notice how David avoided those two extremes. David had the courage to face situations realistically. He was willing to admit the dangers and even talk about them. But he never lost perspective. He didn't allow his fearful circumstances to become bigger than God.

1. Look first of all with me at David's cry for help. READ 57:1-3.

Have mercy on me, O God, have mercy on me, for in you my soul takes refuge. I will take refuge in the shadow of your wings until the disaster has passed. ² I cry out to God Most High, to God, who fulfills *his purpose* for me. ³ He sends from heaven and saves me, rebuking those who hotly pursue me; God sends his love

and his faithfulness.

Now David is in trouble here and he knows it. He cries out to God for help. He pleads for God's mercy. He recognizes his need for outside help to be delivered from his predicament.

But even in the midst of his plea for help, David continues to maintain his perspective on the situation. Yes, Saul was a powerful man. It was true that he had threatening resources at his disposal. And David knew that Saul had committed himself to his destruction. But Saul and his power were nothing compared to God. David uses the name *God Most High* in addressing God. This was the term used in the Bible to recognize God as the only true and living God, above all other humanly made gods or earthly powers. And then David also speaks of a God *who fulfills his purpose for me*. David knew that God had a plan for his life. David had received the anointing oil from Samuel's flask. David had been told of God's purpose in giving to him the throne of Israel. Yes, it certainly appeared that the situation had gotten out of God's control. But David trusted in a God who was all-knowing and had the power to execute his will. So even in the midst of this physical danger that he was in, sitting in a barren cave with adversaries stalking his very life, David called out to God for mercy and help.

2. But let's move on now to consider the crisis that was harmful to David's wellbeing. READ 57:4-6

I am in the midst of lions; I lie among ravenous beasts -- men whose teeth are spears and arrows, whose tongues are sharp swords. ⁵ Be exalted, O God, above the heavens; let your glory be over all the earth. ⁶ They spread a net for my feet -- I

was bowed down in distress. They dug a pit in my path -- but they have fallen into it themselves.

Now David certainly had reason to fear wild beasts - for they often made their homes in these very caves where David was hiding. David knew that he could easily walk into one of the caves which dot the rugged hillside of the Negev and find a lion or pack of wild dogs living inside.

But we know that David was using the term lion in a figurative sense in speaking of King Saul and his men in this passage because he goes on to speak of men who were intent on doing him harm.

And it is most interesting that David picks out 2 specific areas of concern here. First, there was certainly the most obvious physical danger that Saul had placed upon him. So David speaks of men whose teeth are spears and arrows. Saul and his followers were not content to stop until a spear or arrow had pierced David's heart - they were intent upon his complete destruction.

But then David moves to another area of concern - one which we might be tempted to overlook, but was a real concern for him. He goes on to say *men whose tongues are sharp swords*. David was not only concerned with Saul's spear, but he was also aware of Saul's tongue. David knew that the King was spreading lies and untrue stories about him all the time that he was hunting him, deceitful rumors that could mar and ruin David's reputation. David realized that as a king his name and reputation would be most important to him. So he was concerned about all the harmful damage that was being done to him as he was hiding away in a cave - unable to defend himself in any way. Even David's running as a fugitive might

lead some people to assume his guilt. And David knew that Saul would use everything that he possibly could to his advantage. David knew the destructive power of the gossip that Saul was spreading about him and it concerned him - it concerned him as much as the physical danger of Saul's swords and spears and arrows.

It is true that there is great power in words: Someone has written a brief poem entitled *Small Beginnings*:

A snowflake is so very small we scarcely think of it at all

And yet enough of them will make a barrier that we cannot break

A drop of water is so slight that as it falls it fades from sight,

And yet enough of them will be a torrent or a raging sea.

A word is but a breath of air, Tis heard or spoken without care.

Yet words in fierce profusion hurled upset the history of the world

David's confidence in this real danger was that God could and would overrule Saul's lies by revealing his true character so that David's reputation would not be completely damaged. And that is exactly what happened. Instead of people believing Saul's lies and thinking poorly about David, they began to see Saul's instability of character and began to think that David must be a very special and gifted man if Saul were so intent upon his destruction. As time progressed, Saul's lies and lack of discretion in spreading untrue gossip actually turned on him and hurt his reputation the most.

We can learn lessons not only from the positive example of David, but also from the negative example of Saul. For some of the greatest harm that we can do

to ourselves and our reputations is found in a pattern of not controlling our tongues. If we gain a reputation for spreading gossip or untrue stories, then people eventually will not take anything we say credibly or respect us personally. Oh, they might want to hear the latest newsy morsel from our lips, but they really won't respect us personally.

When we traveled for just over a month in England some years ago now, we enjoyed visiting old churches. Every old church that we saw in England has a graveyard beside it where parishioners down through the centuries have been laid to rest. There was one drab, gray slate tombstone that I read which said volumes about how the people regarded the deceased whose body was buried there. It simply read: *Beneath this stone, a lump of clay, lies Arabella Young, who, on the 24th of May, began to hold her tongue.*

One of the poorest reputations that a person can have in life is that of a gossip - one who spreads stories and lies about others. That was the reputation that Saul gained before he died - and it cost him the respect and honor of the kingship. But David did not retaliate. He really wasn't in a position to do so even if he wanted to. But David committed the matter to the Lord.

Now, as I mentioned earlier, it is critically important that we see the fact that David admitted and faced the harmful crisis that confronted him. David had to physically run for his life and hide in a cave - that is true. His only other alternative was to raise up a mutinous rebellion against Saul and try to overthrow the throne. David knew that this would be a wrong response and would set a horrible precedent of instability for the nation. But David did not succumb to the

temptation of running emotionally as well. He did not deny his dangerous situation. He did not lie to himself. He rather faced his dangers. This is what makes David such an example of courage. For courageous people are not those who have no dangers; nor are they people who have no fear in danger. David had real dangers and he felt real fear in the midst of those dangers. But courageous people are those who are willing to face their fears and ask for help from a source that can provide the help. This is a tremendously freeing experience - when the danger is faced and help is secured.

A couple who is having difficulties in a marriage is courageous when they admit those problems that they are having and seek out the help of a good counselor who can guide them to better communication. This becomes a freeing experience in a relationship.

A student who is being bullied by someone at school is courageous when he admits the problem that he is having and seeks out help in facing the bully. What a freeing experience it is when a young person faces that bully with an older friend and becomes released from that awful grip.

A person who is experiencing some serious health symptoms is courageous when she makes an appointment with the doctor and has some tests run. As long as there is denial, fear and anxiety rule. But when the symptoms are faced there is the freeing experience of knowing exactly what the health problem is being able to take some steps towards a cure.

Whenever fears are denied or run from, they just become bigger and more complicated. When fears are faced and dealt with there is freedom and relief.

David knew this principle.

3. But finally note with me David's confession of hope. READ 57:7-11.

⁷ My heart is steadfast, O God, my heart is steadfast; I will sing and make music. ⁸ Awake, my soul! Awake, harp and lyre! I will awaken the dawn. ⁹ I will praise you, O Lord, among the nations; I will sing of you among the peoples. ¹⁰ For great is your love, reaching to the heavens; your faithfulness reaches to the skies. ¹¹ Be exalted, O God, above the heavens; let your glory be over all the earth.

Music in the midst of madness. Praise in the midst of persecution. Worship instead of worry. That was David's choice. He refused to allow the threats of Saul to rob him of his song in life.

How did David reach this position where he could sing from the cave where he was hiding? He was humble enough to cry out to God for help; he was honest enough to admit the crisis that was harmful to him; and he had faith to confess his hope in the Lord in the midst of his struggles.

And what is most interesting to note was the fact that David's joy and confidence was not expressed here after Saul had finally been killed and he had become recognized as the king of Israel. No, this joy came from David as he was sitting alone in the barren cave. David found joy in the midst of the dangerous situation. Anyone can have joy when the danger is passed. But only God can give joy in the midst of the trial. But we can only find that joy as we find it in God himself.

One of the most traumatic events that any country endures is the assassination of its leader. Certainly the most trying moments in our country's history have been

the times when our presidents have been shot while in office. Most of us who are old enough know exactly where we were when President Kennedy was assassinated and when President Reagan was shot. William McKinley was the 25th president of the U.S. During his first term our country made great advances both at home and abroad. We won the Spanish-American war further entrenching our position as a world power. And business and industry were booming at the turn of the 20th century. But it was just 6 months into his second term of office that McKinley became our 3rd president to that time to be assassinated.

When President Reagan was shot several years ago, he was rushed to a hospital, x-rays were taken to determine the exact location of the bullet, and an operation was performed so that the bullet could be removed. His life was spared. President William McKinley was at the 1901 Pan American Exposition in Buffalo, N.Y., giving a speech when he was shot. He was rushed into a tent and the best of medical personnel was called to assist him. They operated, trying to locate and remove the bullet, but could not find the exact location of the bullet at first. But the time the extensive exploratory operation was completed, McKinley's body was so severely weakened by the procedure that 8 days later, he died in Buffalo. The irony of President McKinley's death was that one tent over from where he was being worked on by the medical personnel was a new invention that was being introduced to the world for the very first time. It was called an x ray machine. We know today that it could have saved President McKinley's life if it would have only been used. But in the chaos and panic of the moment, nobody even thought of that x-ray machine. It was considered to be only an experimental

exhibit. And our country lost a leader.

How many people, in the chaos and panic of their dangerous dilemma, forget that there is a loving and all-knowing and all-powerful God who is just a prayer away who is more than willing to step in, giving his help and strength in our time of need. David remembered - and that is what allowed him to have a song of joy in the midst of imminent danger. It allowed David to express praise even from a cave.