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A Call for Help

Psalm 28

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A couple of weeks ago my wife and I went to the north shore of Minnesota for a few days of quiet beside the lake, and on our way we stopped in Duluth and decided to have a picnic lunch. It was just a gorgeous day. We sat on a park bench under a little covering and looked out over the lake, enjoying the scenery as we ate lunch. There was a wedding going on, and some musicians came near to us and sat down and began to play. It really was a beautiful setting.

All of a sudden, we heard behind us this cursing—somebody really chewing somebody out. It got louder and louder and closer and closer, and we couldn't quite figure out who this woman was yelling at. Then she came right up to us and sat down about five feet from us on a bench, and we realized that she was not talking to anybody. She was just very, very upset. And she was upset about life. She was mad at the city; she cursed the city. And she cursed the lake. She cursed the people getting married and the musicians. Life was bad! It was such a reminder that what, to us, was a beautiful, serene, wonderful place... to her, was nothing but trouble because of the depth of her own problems and the pain in her own life.

We all face difficult circumstances during the course of our life. We all have challenges and trials that come into our lives. That's a fact of life. If you would think about a trial, a difficult situation that you have faced in your life, what do you do when you're in the middle of it? How do you cope with or handle the situations that come your way? Those situations are many times not because of anything that you've done, but simply things that happen to you.

Well, there are a number of things we can do. One that we're all very good at is worry, right? You can worry about it, lie in your bed, stay awake at night, not get any sleep, toss and turn. That accomplishes a lot. That's always profitable.

Some of us begin to immediately figure out a way to fix it, to solve it, to overcome it. We begin to scheme and plan and work and say, "You know, we'll just make this thing go away. We'll take matters into our own hands."

Others may try to get sympathy or empathy from people—you know, tell everybody how horrible the person is who's doing this to you, gather sympathy from a little crowd around you. You whine and complain and hopefully get some sympathy.

Some people do nothing. They just hope it goes away. They think that maybe one morning it will all hopefully just be gone.

When we look at the life of David, we are really challenged to consider another option that I'm sure many of us already do, and that is *to pray*. The very first thing David did when he faced a difficult situation was turn to God. He poured out his heart to God and he talked to God. And he stayed with that until God brought an answer...until God brought deliverance. Many of the psalms are David's expressions of prayer. They are called "lament psalms." They are psalms where he pours out his heart before God. We want to look at one of those psalms this morning: Psalm 28.

Now, in some of these psalms which are prayers, the circumstances that led to the prayer are evident in the text. For example, in the one we are going to look at next week, Psalm 22, it is very clear what David is dealing with and what leads to the prayer. But in this particular psalm, Psalm 28, it isn't really clear, other than David has been facing something that is very much pressing in on him, overwhelming him, and there is a desperate cry for help.

We will see in this psalm that there are basically four parts. There's a progression through this psalm that very much teaches us about our own prayer life—how we ought to approach God and what those various pieces of effective praying are in our lives. I think that's what God wants to teach us by example: what you and I need to do when we are in difficult life circumstances. David is very instructive in that.

We begin the first section of chapter 28 with the first two verses. David says:

To You, O LORD, I call; my rock, do not be deaf to me, for if you are silent to me, I will become like those who go down to the pit. Hear the voice of my supplications when I cry to You for help, when I lift up my hands toward Your holy sanctuary. (v. 1-2, NASB)

David is crying out to God in a prayer of dependence. David is acknowledging in verses 1 and 2 his absolute dependence on God to face the situation. David says, "I recognize, God, that You are the rock; You are the refuge; You are the boulder behind which I can hide—where I can seek shelter from this difficult situation." He sees God as a defense, a stronghold, a rock. David says, "You're the rock. You're the one in whom I want to take refuge. You are the only one I know who can do what needs to be done in this situation."

But notice what David's deep cry of desperation is: "Do not be deaf to me, for if you are silent, I will be like those who go down to the pit." He says he will be like those who perish without hope. This gives us a hint that David has been persisting in prayer for some time about this situation, and it is feeling to David like God isn't answering. This trial continues and the situation goes on, and it seems to David like God is deaf—like God is not listening.

I don't think David was concerned that God couldn't hear, but more likely David is saying, "God, don't turn a deaf ear to me. Don't ignore my plea. Don't turn away from my request. You need to be my rock. You need to step in. You need to act. I don't know if I can make it any longer if You don't act. I will be like those who perish without hope. I don't know that I can hang on anymore." Have any of you been in a place like that, where the trial has gone on and on, perhaps? The difficulty...the injustice...whatever it is that you face. It's those long-term trials that are really hard, aren't they? The trials that come and go quickly—we can handle those most of the time. But it's the ones that persist—where we've prayed and prayed, but it just doesn't seem like God is answering. This psalm is a prayer of desperate dependence. David is saying, "God, you need to show up in this situation."

Notice that he has prayed about it many times: "hear the voice of my *supplications*." David is repeatedly brought this request before God. He has cried out for help. This is not one of those situations where you just lay on your bed in the morning because you're too tired to get out, and you say, "Well, I'll pray while I lay here." You sort of doze in and out of sleep while you're praying, and then you wake up and pray, but it's rather casual. Instead, this is an intensity that David is feeling. This is serious. This is urgent! The picture is of David going out somewhere, like some of you have done and like I have done, to be away from other people, where you cry out to God and you plead with God, "God, act! Intervene! Step in!"

David is saying he is not only crying out to God, vocalizing this prayer, but he is also raising his hands toward the sanctuary, which was the dwelling place of God. So David stood with his hands extended to God as a demonstration of dependence. This wasn't raising hands in worship, but it was an act of absolute dependence. The picture that we've seen before, that I think we could understand, is the picture of people in a refugee camp, or people who are starving, and a truck comes to deliver food. When the relief workers come, the crowd gathers around the back of the truck and what do the people do? They stand with their hands outstretched just waiting to have something passed to them.

They want to make sure they are not neglected, that they're not left out. They know that if they don't get some food off that truck their family may perish, and so there's this "reach of desperation." That is what David is doing. He is crying out and he is reaching out in desperation saying, "God, you need to act and intervene because I don't know if I can take it any longer!" It's a prayer of desperate dependence.

The beginning of effective prayer in our life is recognizing that we are absolutely dependent on God. We are so convinced of our need for God to intervene in our life circumstances that we will prevail in prayer until He answers. We will persist and not give up. We won't just say, "Well, I prayed about it," or, "Okay, God, I'm sitting here waiting." But we will persist and persist and persist until God answers.

Jesus told a story to His disciples to teach them to pray. Remember the widow lady who was being treated unjustly (Luke 18), and she went before the local judge to get some relief? The judge didn't care about her. He didn't care about the situation—it just seemed like a petty annoyance to him. But the woman came and came and came and came, and she refused to stop coming. And sooner or later he said, "Fine, you bother me... I'm going to solve your dilemma. I'm going to step in and act."

Now Jesus was not saying that is what God is like—that He is bothered by us, and if we bother Him enough He will answer our prayer. Jesus was teaching about what the disciples needed to do: they needed to be persistent in prayer. It is not so that we can get God's attention or that we will bother Him enough that He will act on our behalf. But it is a fact that when we persist in prayer, *we* are the ones changed. God has more access to our hearts and our lives, and we are changed as a result of that. We learn; we grow.

In fact, I think God allows these kinds of difficult trials and circumstances in our life to teach us dependence, to deepen our relationship with Him. There are ways we can draw near to God in those deep, dark times that there is no other way to get that close to God. We need Him in an unusual way, but we have to be persistent. I think sometimes God is waiting to answer until He sees evidence of, *Are you really serious? Is this really important? How important is it to you that I act? Is this just a passing little prayer request, or are you serious? Do you really want Me to act?* I think it's a test of our own heart, our own will, of whether or not we really want God to step in and act, or whether we believe we can handle it on our own. David begins by a statement of absolute dependence on God.

In verses 3 and 4 he gives his two specific requests. The first one is in verse 3. He says:

Do not drag me away with the wicked and with those who work inequity, who speak peace with their neighbors, while evil is in their hearts. (NASB)

This is a prayer specifically for God's mercy, that God would not allow David to become like the people who are causing the trouble in his life.

Now that is very interesting, because I think one of the things that we are often blind to is how susceptible we are to becoming like people who do unjust things to us. David recognizes that when the trial is deep, when the pain is great, that we are very vulnerable to taking matters into my own hands and becoming evil, just like maybe the very people who have done something to us. I think there are lots of examples of that.

I can remember a time in my life where I was basically surrounded in business by very unethical people. They did unethical things and they dealt with me unethically. They dealt with everybody

unethically. In fact, their great thrill in life was suing people—that was just what they loved to do. And they were supposedly Christian people. It was a very difficult circumstance. I tried ways to try and distance my part of the business from the rest of them, and it was hard. But the danger that I felt over the course of time is that the longer I was there, the more I was becoming like them and the more I began to think, *Oh, well, that's not that big of a deal.*

I think David here is surrounded by wicked people. He is surrounded by people that he described as wicked workers of inequity and people who have evil in their hearts. It's a wickedness that means restless activity. It's the working of people who do not have God in their life, who are trying to do things on their own, really fighting against God in all this restless activity. They were workers of inequity, meaning that they had no rules; they made up their own rules. It was idolatry. They would say whatever was right was what they said was right.

He also describes them as those who would speak peace to their neighbor but have evil plans or mischief in their hearts. In other words, they were scheming and deceitful. They had no restraint on their life. Relationships meant nothing to them. People meant nothing to them. Nothing held them in check. They had no rules, no restraints; they were restless and they are scheming and working all around him. I think David is saying, "You know what, God, if you don't step in, I'm going to become just like them."

Some of you have experienced various kinds of abuse and injustice from other people, and one of the temptations we have when we face those things is to take matters into our own hands and seek vengeance to get even. Or we become so angry and embittered toward those who have mistreated us that we fall into sin and we end up being just like the people who did something to us. David is saying, "God, have mercy on me. I don't want to be like these people who are all around me. The only way that I am going to stay free from that, the only way that I'm going to remain in intimacy with You and to be a righteous person in the midst of this kind of situation is if You step in and have mercy on me and protect me, or I'll become just like them."

We need to be aware of the danger that is there when we are in the middle of evil or when we are the victim of someone else's injustice or abuse. We need to turn to God and we need to ask God to keep us from becoming like those who would oppress.

The second part of David's prayer is a specific request in verse 4:

Requite them [deal with them] according to their work and according to their evil practices; requite [deal with] them according to the deeds of their hands; repay them their recompense [give them what they deserve]. (NASB)

The second part of his prayer, after he has prayed for mercy that he not become like them, is that God would bring justice. He prayed that justice would prevail—that God would deal with these wicked people according to the way they deserve to be dealt with. Now, I don't think this is necessarily angry vengeance. It's not, "God, shoot a lightning bolt and wipe them out!" I don't think that David was necessarily hateful toward the wicked.

But I think David understood a couple of things. First of all, when the wicked prevail, I am tempted to be drawn after them. But the wicked (the workers of inequity, those who would abuse and do injustice toward others) also drag other people down. They hurt people. They abuse people. They destroy people. And we know from statistics, for instance in the case of abuse, that a high percentage of people who are abused become abusers.

David says, "God, we need You to act in justice. I'm asking you to deal with these wicked people so that this evil is not perpetrated on others, that it doesn't continue its destroying ways."

Now, if you work with people and you are aware of the kinds of things that people face and deal with, and the injustices that have been done against people, it makes you angry after awhile. I was talking with a man in our church who heads up a large law enforcement agency, and he talked about how hard it is for policemen to not be so cynical and angry over all the horrible things they see day after day.

David is saying, “God, I need You to act and bring justice, because if You do not step in and bring justice, there is going to be destruction and ruined lives all over the place.” So David is imploring God to act, to be the just God that He is. And he is on his face—he’s serious about it. He desperately wants God to intervene.

It is one thing for us to sit around with some other people and complain about the bad things in the world and the bad people in the world. But the question is: Are we as intentional as David about going before God and asking Him to act? Do we really hate injustice? Do we really hate evil to the point that we will get on our face before God and ask Him to intervene, to step in, to stop it? Are we so angry by the destruction of the evil one that is affecting people’s lives that we take seriously the work of prayer to ask God to do something about it?

David was. David has been praying this for a long time. He has been seeking relief from these evil people around him for a long time. He has been concerned about his own heart and soul for a long time and how he could be dragged down. And he persisted and prevailed in that prayer, and now in verse 5 he gets the answer. Something changes here. We are not told whether God stepped in and answered and the people were wiped out, or whether God just gave David an assurance that He would answer—that He would deal with these people and that He would spare David’s life from going down the same path. But somehow, in verse 5, the entire psalm switches. David says:

Because they [*these evil people*] do not regard the works of the LORD, nor the deeds of His hands, He will tear them down and not build them up. (NASB)

David suddenly has an assurance that God has heard and that God is going to answer. The answer is on the way!

Now, when we pray, one of the things we think of as praying is us talking to God. But somewhere in there we need to listen to what God says. Prayer is conversation; it’s two-way. So we have to be serious about asking and imploring God to move and to act and to work on our behalf. But then we also need to listen for the answer. Sometimes we need to just wait for God and continue to wait until He does answer. In this case, I believe David got an assurance from God (no doubt from the Scriptures that he had) that God would act.

You see, a part of praying that we need to do is to listen to what God wants to say back to us. We have asked Him to do something, and we listen by opening up the Word and reading what it says. It tells us many times—gives us the assurance of what God will do—and the promise of the Scripture is that God will deal with the unjust. He will right the wrongs. The evil will not go unpunished, and David gets that assurance in verse 5. We’re not sure quite how, but suddenly he is convinced that God has heard and that the answer is coming. Now David no longer is petitioning and urgently praying. Now he is praising God for the answer.

Blessed by the LORD, because He has heard the voice of my supplication. The LORD is my strength and my shield; my heart trusts in Him, and I am helped; therefore my heart exalts, and with my song I will thank Him. (v. 6-7, NASB)

The persistence of prayer has paid off and the answer has come, and David now turns to thanksgiving and rejoicing. He says, “I trusted in God and He heard me—He answered me!” David

even acknowledges that his heart was changed in the process. He said, “My heart trusts in Him.” The result of David’s persistence in prayer is a *changed heart*—a heart that trusts in God in a much deeper way than he had before. “My heart trusted in Him and I’m helped!”

I’m not so sure but what the real change in this was not the circumstances, but the change within David. David was helped just through the process of being persistent in prayer, and his heart was changed. He had a whole new level of trust in God. He says, “Therefore my heart exalts.” It really means “My heart leaps for joy.” There’s an excitement and enthusiasm. There’s a rejoicing and a celebration in David as a result of God’s answer to his prayer. He talks about singing: “Therefore my heart exalts, and with my song I will thank Him.” In other words, David is just as intense in his thanksgiving, in his praise of God for answering his prayer, as he was intense and persistence in his asking God to answer prayer. His worship was a reflection of his dependence on God and the answer God had given.

The account is told of the lepers who came to be healed. Of the ten lepers who all experienced healing, nine went away and never even said thank you—they just went on their way. Only one came back and gave thanks. I am so convicted by that, because I can be praying and praying and praying and asking God to do something, and He answers, and I then sometimes go on like nothing happened. It’s just presumptuous on my part. I don’t even stop to thank Him. I don’t even stop to celebrate—to rejoice in the victory.

Frankly, I think as Christians we are not very good at celebrating. I don’t think we do enough celebrating. I think our weddings look like our funerals. We don’t know how to really throw a good party. David throws an elaborate party of praise to God because God had stepped in and done what only God could do. And when God works, when God changes a life, when God resolves a situation, we need to celebrate it. We need to call our friends together. We need to say, “Let’s celebrate! Let’s rejoice in what God has done!” In fact, as you come into the sanctuary on Saturday night or Sunday, your worship should be a reflection back on what God has done in your life through the week. And as you have reflected on God’s involvement in your life, His protection and His care, the answers to prayer you’ve received, and all the things God is doing in your life, that’s the fuel of worship that then causes you to want to sing and shout and praise Him. If you’re lackluster in your worship, very likely it is because you are not reflecting on what God has done for you.

David worships. He celebrates because God has done what only God can do—deliver him from this particular trial and situation.

Now, it’s easy to get stuck there. Even if we are thanking God and worshiping Him, we sometimes just keep celebrating and tell people, “Wow, look what He’s done in my life,” and we talk about all these good things God has done. But David doesn’t stop there. He doesn’t just stay in the sanctuary celebrating. Notice in verses 8 and 9 what he does. He says:

The LORD is their strength, and He is a saving defense to His anointed. Save Your people and bless Your inheritance; be their shepherd also and carry them forever.

(NASB)

What happens here? David is worshiping and he is thanking God for His intervention. Then all of a sudden, David has an awareness of other people. David says, “You know what? I’m not the only one who is going through a difficult thing.” And David begins to pray for other people. David begins to pray for God’s anointed. David is the anointed king, but he is not the only one; these are God’s people, and David’s heart turns toward them and their situations. He has been delivered, but many people around him haven’t been delivered yet. They are still living in their difficult circumstances

and situations. They are still being oppressed. So he begins to pray for them and he says, “God, You are their saving defense just like You are my saving defense.” And in verse 9 he says, “Save Your people, bless Your inheritance. Pour out Your rich blessing on Your people. Be their shepherd.” It comes back to the imagery of Psalm 23—that God is a shepherd—and David prays, “Shepherd Your people. Walk them through their dark situations. And when it gets too great and the burden is too heavy, carry them. Pick them up and carry them through those difficult things.”

I am deeply convicted by those verses, because I can be so intense in my prayers for the situations that are affecting me. I can get on my face and I can seek God’s relief, and I can pray and pray and pray. And I can celebrate when I’m done and say, “Wow, God has answered!” But too many times it stops there, and I fail to have God’s heart for other people, to realize that even though maybe I’ve been delivered, other people haven’t. So a part of my response from having experienced God’s deliverance is that I begin to pray and intercede for other people who are still in whatever situation they are in.

It would be very interesting for us to stop and evaluate our prayer life. What are the things that we pray about? How much of our prayer time is spent on us—our needs, our wants, our circumstances, our situations? And how much of that is devoted to other people and their circumstances and their situations? I am so convicted about how selfish I am, about how much of the focus is on me. Here is David, having been delivered, and all of a sudden the Spirit of God leads David to begin to pray for others—his people all around him. He devotes himself to praying for them.

I think part of the reason God even allows us to walk through difficult things is so that when we are through the other side, we can turn around and help other people. But we are so busy going on to the next crisis that we have in our life. We are so selfish. At the end of having experienced deliverance from God, after the celebration, we need to turn our attention to other people and intercede on their behalf. There are people you know who don’t know Christ, who are bound up in all kinds of things. Are you praying for them? You probably know other people in your small group who have situations they are facing. Are you as intense and persistent in prayer that they would be relieved of their circumstance, that they would get victory, as you are about your own victory?

You see, I’m convinced that God has limited Himself to do only what His people ask Him to do. We are told that we are joint heirs with Christ. We are part of His family, that we have been invited to participate in God’s work in the world. We are not just bystanders, sort of watching what God is doing. God says “Come and join Me in the work.” Part of that work is interceding—praying. Often when we think of ministry, we think of *doing* things. We think of going somewhere, visiting somebody, teaching a class, serving someone. But a HUGE part of ministry is prayer. It is interceding on behalf of other people. And there’s not a physical limitation to that at all. You can be 103 and bedridden and be a prayer warrior in ministry. There is no limitation. There is no “gift” of prayer. It is something that we are all called to do—to intercede on behalf of other people. And as we have tasted of God’s deliverance and victory in our own life, we ought to be that intentional and that intense about praying for other people.

Think about the people you know in your life who need prayer—who need God to step into their circumstance. I believe God is waiting for us to get serious about praying before He is going to step in and answer. God is not limited in the sense that He can’t act unless we pray, but God says, “I want you to be a partner with Me in this, so I will limit Myself until you pray.” In fact, I don’t believe there is anything really good or noble that happens apart from people having prayed about it. I have never met a person who came to Christ that didn’t have someone praying for them before they became a Christian. Every single great movement of God in the Scripture was always preceded by times of intense prayer. I don’t believe that anything happens apart from us getting serious about interceding for other people.

So if we want to see life change, if we want to see victory, whether in our children, a spouse, a neighbor, a work situation, or whatever it is, we need to get serious about prayer. We need to get on our knees and be as persistent in that as we are when we are in the middle of a personal crisis.

I would say that, of our seven core values as a church, probably *prayer* would be one of our weakest ones. I don't say that as a guilt thing. I just think it is where God wants to grow us. I think we are very strong in instruction, and I think we understand a lot of those other things. But we need to be intentional in prayer, understanding that if we are not on our face before God, we are not going to see the things happen that we know need to happen. People's lives will not be changed.

I am so thankful that there are people who are prayer warriors in our church. They pray and pray and they encourage others to pray. There is a group that meets to pray on Sunday mornings at 8:00 o'clock during the first service. There's a group that meets Saturday night just to pray. They understand that if God doesn't show up, nothing good is going to come out of all the things that we do. Prayer is central to what we need to be doing when we are together. It is central to what happens in our LifeGroups. Almost a thousand people meet every week or every other week in their LifeGroups, and prayer is a huge part of that. They pray for one another, joining each other and asking God to work.

It is a huge part of what we do as leaders. When our staff directional team meets on Thursday mornings, we spend the whole first part of the morning just praying. We pray for each other. We pray for circumstances in the church. We pray for people. When our elder board meets once a month, we take the very first part of that meeting just to pray. And then, every time we go to a new decision or a new thing, we either pray before or after that—at least that is our intent.

We understand that we need to be growing in prayer. We need to be more intentional about prayer. We need to be asking God to step in and do what only God can do. We have incredible opportunities before us as a church: the opportunity to plant churches in India, the opportunity to reach people in our city. But we also have challenges. We need more resources. We need the right staff people. We need more leaders. But God is the one who has to do all those things. We cannot get to the goal and fulfill the mission in our own strength, in our own wisdom, in our own human understanding. We need God to show up. And if we really believe that, then we are going to be intentional about prayer. We're going to get serious about it. It is going to take a higher place of priority in our life than perhaps it ever has before.

David was utterly dependent. He was persistent in asking God to intervene. He rejoiced when God answered, and he interceded for others. And those things should be characteristic of your life and my life as God's people.

We are going to start a prayer room next weekend here at church, where people can come to be prayed for or to pray with someone. From 9:30 on Sunday morning until 12:30, people can come and pray with somebody, because I know we sometimes come with heavy burdens. Sometimes it feels too great. Sometimes we are like David, saying, "I don't know that I can go on." There will be people in the prayer room to pray with you. There will also be group prayer on Saturday night and Sunday morning during the first hour. If you want to be a part of that, you can join. Everyone is invited to come and pray. I believe God is calling us to a whole new level of dependence on Him that is only evidenced by the seriousness and the intentionality of our prayer life.