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God Is My Stronghold

Psalm 59

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I suppose to his parents he was nothing special—just a young teenage shepherd, the youngest of many sons. But to God he was very special. Not only was he very gifted musically, but he had a passionate heart for God. As a matter of fact, he was the polar opposite of the current king in Israel. The current king in Israel was Saul. Saul, humanly speaking, had the whole package—tall, dark, handsome. He seemed to have everything that qualified him to be a great leader. The problem was Saul didn't have a heart for God. And in those moments of crisis, it became evident that Saul had a heart for himself far more than a heart for God. So God said to Saul, "I'm going to remove you as king, and I'm going to put somebody on the throne that has a heart for Me." As a young teenage shepherd boy, David was anointed one day to be the next king in Israel.

The Spirit of the Lord departed from Saul, and an evil spirit tormented him. He discovered the only thing that would bring him relief was when David was in his presence playing music. So David as a young teenage boy spent a great deal of time in the presence of the king. You would have to imagine David often wondered what it would be like someday when he would be king.

Everything was going along nicely until this giant by the name of Goliath out of the army of the Philistines uttered a challenge to the army of Israel: "Pick your best fighter, and we'll go one on one. Winner take all." Day after day after day he uttered this challenge, and neither Saul nor anyone else in the army was willing to trust God and fight the giant.

One day David went up to the battlefield to visit his brothers to take them some food, and he happened to be there when the giant uttered his challenge. And David looked around wondering who was going to step up first to drop this "big mouth" (the Living Bible version). But to his disappointment, no one stepped forward – not Saul, not even one of the soldiers.

David understood that ultimately Goliath was taunting God Himself, and nobody in the army of Israel was willing to stand up to that. So David decided he would do that. David took a slingshot, threw one rock and dropped the giant, and almost overnight became a hero among his people.

As they went through the streets, the people shouted, "Saul has slain his thousands, but David has killed his ten thousands." And as happens to insecure leaders, Saul felt threatened by David's success and believed that David must be eliminated or he would take the throne. So on two occasions, within the palace walls, he tried to kill David. He threw a spear at him. David barely escaped with his life. David realized that it was time to "get out of Dodge."

He went back to his house, to his wife who strangely enough was actually the daughter of King Saul. But Saul dispatched soldiers and followed David home. They surrounded David's house. It was easy. The orders were to wait until sun up and at first light, execute David.

It's hard for us to process what life was like in a monarchy. There was no calling 911. There was no appeal. There was no government agency. The king was the law, and if the king wanted you dead then you were dead. There were no other options.

It's in that moment, then, that David turned to God because God was his only option. It's hard for us to understand because we live in a country filled with options. If plan A doesn't work, we go to plan B. If B doesn't work, we go to C, and we go to D, and we go to E. Oftentimes that is what

gets us in trouble. Rather than seeking God as our safe place in time of trouble, we just move to the next option.

I think oftentimes we give God a little prayer, say a few words, and move on to the next option. But we really don't seek God in times of trouble, so we really don't experience God as our fortress, our safe place, our stronghold. David didn't have another option. All he had was to turn to God.

Now for you this morning, your enemy probably isn't a group of soldiers that have surrounded your house and will kill you at sun up. It may be another person who is attacking you, who is falsely accusing you, who is maligning you. But it could be about anything. It could be a health problem. It could be a financial problem. It could be some emotional trauma. It could be any real circumstance in your life that has you surrounded this morning. What was it this week that caused you to lose sleep? What was it this week that robbed your joy? That's your enemy that's got you surrounded.

A very interesting thing about David is that in the midst of the worst of circumstances where by sunrise he will be dead, he spends his night joyfully singing praises to God. What if I were to tell you this morning that before you left this place you would know there is every reason, regardless of what your enemy is, to joyfully sing praises to God? Would you be interested in that? If so, I invite you to turn with me to Psalm 59.

We've looked at several of these Psalms in the 50's this summer. It's kind of a unique collection of Psalms written by David. Pretty much all but one have the little writing, the superscription, that tells you what the background of the Psalm was. In Psalm 59 we see that it again is a song. It is a piece of music. There is a note, "**For the choir director; set to Al-tashheth.**" We've seen that before; it means "Do not destroy." It was probably either a tune or a style of music. It's "**A Mikhtam of David**" which means to engrave—it's a message that needs to be engraved on our hearts.

With that background in mind, we pick it up in verse 1:

Deliver me from my enemies, O my God; set me securely on high away from those who rise up against me. Deliver me from those who do iniquity and save me from men of bloodshed. For behold, they have set an ambush for my life; fierce men launch an attack against me, not for my transgression nor for my sin, O LORD, for no guilt of mine, they run and set themselves against me. Arouse Yourself to help me, and see! You, O LORD God of hosts, the God of Israel, awake to punish all the nations; do not be gracious to any who are treacherous in iniquity. Selah. (Psalm 59:1-5, *NASB)

Notice the words that David uses at the beginning of the Psalm: "**Deliver me...set me on high...deliver me...save me.**" You can tell he feels a sense of urgency. You can tell he is emotionally overwhelmed by this situation. He's surrounded. At sun up he dies. There is no way out. "To deliver me" is a Hebrew a word that means to "snatch me up." You get the picture of David in his house surrounded by soldiers. He wants God to reach into the middle of the situation and to snatch him out of it and to set him on high.

In the ancient world—and I'm guessing this held true up until the invention of helicopters and airplanes—at wartime the highest ground was always considered the safest ground. If you got to the highest point, no one could sneak up on you; they could not attack you. You always had the advantage in battle. So throughout the Scriptures, the high ground is considered the safe ground—

it's a refuge. That's what he wants. He wants God to reach in and snatch him out of danger and set him on the high ground where he will be safe.

In verse 2 he goes on to talk about being delivered and saved from these men of bloodshed. In the last part of verse 3, he says, **"...not for my transgression nor for my sin...for no guilt of mine, they run and set themselves against me."** David is saying he doesn't deserve this; he's done nothing wrong. There is no reason for the king to do this to him.

Sometimes we find ourselves in very difficult circumstances because of our own bad choices. It doesn't mean in those moments that God abandons us or God doesn't care, but it is certainly a different situation than when we end up in very difficult circumstances through no fault of our own. As a matter of fact, sometimes we're just trying to do the right thing and people falsely accuse us or misunderstand. And that is what David is saying. As a matter of fact, all he has done is the *right* thing.

David had a heart for God, and that was the basis by which God chose him as the next king. But from that moment on, for the next sixteen years, his life would be miserable. Over and over again David does the right thing, and his life just goes from bad to worse. And that's hard to process. That's what he is saying here: "God, I haven't done anything wrong. This isn't because of something I did to the king. It all seems so unfair."

At the end of verse 4 he says, **"Arouse Yourself."** The Hebrew word means, "Wake up. Wake up to help me and see!" It's important to understand that in order to apply this psalm to our own life, we have to recognize that these men and women of faith in the Scriptures were not immune to the reality of their situations. David did not enter the house, see the soldiers surrounding him, and say to his wife, "Look, honey, there are soldiers out there. No problem, I'm super-Christian. It doesn't bother me."

And yet, sometimes I think that's how we think they were. What David is saying is, "Help me! Deliver me! God, You've got to wake up here—I'm in trouble!" In essence he is saying, "God, if You sleep in this morning, I am dead! Just want to make sure You know that!" You can feel the urgency in his voice. But in the process of doing that, he begins to focus his attention on God, and everything begins to change.

In verse 5, he goes through several names of God, and we've talked about the fact that names of God are actually descriptors of God. He says, **"You, O LORD."** In all capitals—we know that's the Hebrew *Yahweh*. It's not an unusual name for God. It's the name of the God who is intimate, the God who is personal, the God who makes a covenant with His people. One of the things that distinguished the God of the Hebrews from every other god in the ancient world was they believed they had a God who was personal, a God who was intimate, a God who dwelt among them. And actually, it's the same thing that separates Christianity from every other world religion today. Christianity is the only religion that really believes there is a God who is intimate and personal and dwells within a person. He knows me by name, and He cares about everything in my life.

Even though it's not unusual to see the name *Yahweh* in the Scripture, it is unusual in the Psalms here in the 50's. As a matter of fact, some people refer to these as the "*Elohim* Psalms" because the predominant name for God is *Elohim*, the Creator God, the Almighty God. In times of crisis, it's good to know that God is all-powerful.

It's good to know that God has unlimited power, but it's very important to know that God knows me by name. I'm in a crisis here. I need to know that God knows that—that God understands I've

got a problem here and He cares about me. And that is reflected in the fact that David calls God by His personal, intimate covenant name *Yahweh*—God of Hosts. Whenever you see that in the Scriptures, it's a reference to God as the general of heaven. The idea is that God is the leader of the armies of heaven—that God has this host of angels who are dressed for battle at His disposal.

The reality is when you look at David's situation, the odds are not even. What he is saying is that's true, they are not even, but Saul is the one coming out on the losing end because God is the God of a host of angels in heaven that are standing ready to deliver David when God says so.

And He is the God of Israel—meaning Israel as the covenant people, the chosen people. I think it's reflective of the fact that God made a promise to David, and the promise was that one day David would be king. For sixteen years David would flee for his life, and Saul would try to kill him. And over and over again, David remembered that God promised He would make him king. Even when the circumstances looked absolutely hopeless, David would remember what God promised. *I can't die here; He promised I would be king.* It is reflective then in the “God of Israel”—the God who made a covenant, who made a promise. And David believed God would keep that promise.

In verse 5 he says, “**Awake to punish all the nations.**” There are two times in this Psalm where David refers to the nations. There are some commentators who think because of that, this Psalm couldn't possibly reflect the situation that is described in the superscription because it wasn't about the nations; it was just about Saul's army. But nobody is saying this Psalm was actually penned that night. As a matter of fact, we believe it was probably penned after David was king, when he was thinking back to what happened that night—what lessons he learned and how those lessons were helpful to him now as a king.

Now that's not a hard thing to imagine. Oftentimes in private moments, we learn great faith lessons that later in life remind us of God's faithfulness for whatever we're facing. That's David's case in this Psalm as well.

In verses 6 and 7, he is describing the enemy.

They return at evening, they howl like a dog, and go around the city. Behold, they belch forth with their mouth; swords are in their lips, for, they say, “Who hears?”

He is using an imagery of dogs to paint a picture. In the ancient world, dogs were not “man's best friend.” Dogs were wild. Dogs traveled in packs. Dogs were filled with disease. Dogs were dangerous; they were a nuisance. And when evening would settle into the city, these packs of dogs would come into the city. They would eat trash. They would fight in the streets. They would howl all night. They were an absolute nuisance. Several times in the Old Testament Scriptures there is a reference to dogs because they were such a familiar presence in these cities.

So probably David was seeing the dogs coming into the city, and they're barking and they're howling and they're fighting. And he sees that as an imagery of these soldiers that now have come through the streets. They're surrounding his house, and it sounds like they were very verbal. They weren't standing at attention respectfully waiting to kill him in the morning. They were more like a goon squad, and they're yelling things at him, they're taunting him, they're barking, and they're belching (that's David description of them). And they're saying, “Who hears?”—meaning “Who are you going to get to deliver you? Who's going to bail you out? The king is the law, and the king says you're supposed to be dead.” There's no one else that they answer to.

But of course David knows better than that. Verse 8:

But You, O LORD, laugh at them; You scoff at all the nations.

God knows what is going on. God hears them, and God laughs at them. He scoffs at all the nations. It's not laughing because they're funny; it's laughing because it is so ridiculous that they could fight God and win. David knows that God has this army at His disposal. Saul's army is greatly outnumbered. What a ridiculous thought that they could fight God and win.

Verse 9:

Because of his strength I will watch for You, for God is my stronghold. My God in His lovingkindness will meet me; God will let me look triumphantly upon my foes.

(vs. 9-10)

There is some question in verse 9 whether it's "*his* strength" or "*my* strength." Your translation is probably one or the other. It ends up to be the same; there's just some confusion in the manuscript. If it's "*his* strength," it's talking about Saul. Because of Saul's strength of his army, David can't fight him, so David has to watch for God. If it's "*my* strength," David is saying the same thing: "Because of my strength, and it's so limited compared to Saul's army, all I can do is watch for God." Either way, he is saying the same thing—that Saul has far more strength than David. David's only hope is for God to deliver him. And so all he can do is watch for God to show up and do something.

It makes a great statement though that when God shows up, He will do so in His lovingkindness. God is not going to show up as an angry parent and give him a scolding. God loves him. And God is his Father, and he is His child, and so God is going to show up in this "stronghold"—a Hebrew word that means a safe place, a fortress. And God is going to show up in His lovingkindness and He is going to say, "You know, everything is going to be okay. I'm here now, and I'll guide you and protect you. Everything is going to be all right."

David knows that is his only hope. The place is surrounded. He has no other Plan B, so all he can do is watch and wait. And God will meet him there in His lovingkindness and be to him his place of refuge.

Now, I don't know about you, but I don't like waiting. I just don't. I'm not wired that way. If there's a problem, let's get it fixed. If there's a job to do, let's get it done. I hate half-completed projects. I'm just not made that way. So I hate waiting. As a matter of fact, sometimes when I'm waiting, I get tired of waiting, so I go to plan B. If that doesn't work, I'll go to plan C and plan D.

I found that over the years that most of the worst decisions I've made in my life were because I got tired of waiting and I decided to take charge of the situation. It's hard to wait. I don't like to wait. But I have noticed over the years that when I do wait on God to show up and to deal with something, I'm reminded how dependent upon God I am. I've also found that when I learned to wait, it provides an atmosphere where I can see God show up and celebrate God and grow my faith. It doesn't mean we sit around and do nothing. I think we need to understand what God expects us to do. But sometimes we do our part, and then we just have to wait for God to show up and do His part.

Let me give you an example of something that we're all involved in collectively to try and put some flesh on this. Mark shared with you a couple of weeks ago that we're coming to the end of our fiscal year at the end of July, and we're about \$250,000 behind. Well, you have to put that in some

perspective. Two and a half years ago we launched this campaign. And over the course of those two and a half years, we've taken in well over ten million dollars in operating money, but in addition to that, four and a half million dollars for the Purpose Fund. And in addition to that, we've taken in well over a million dollars for missions, but on top of that missions money, a half a million dollars to planting churches in India. On top of that, we've hived off a couple hundred people who planted a church in north Lincoln that averages over 300 people and as of August will be self-funding. We've been part of planting a church in the intercity called Abiding Grace. And in a couple of months, we'll bring in the first class for the Leadership College. And all of that has been done with all of the bills paid, and with \$250,000 to make up we could end this fiscal year with everything in the black.

Now that's pretty remarkable when you stop and think about it. But it is \$250,000. Now is there something we can do? Yes, Plan A: Go to the congregation and let them know what the situation is. Ask everyone to pray, and God will lead accordingly. I think that's right. That's proper. That's exactly what we've done. I've talked to a handful of other people and that's about it. As a matter of fact, this week in my prayer time with God, I actually said to God, "I feel like I've done everything You've asked me to do on this." All we can do now is wait and watch. I don't like that. (You know if you're planning on writing a \$250,000 check, could you do it this weekend? Of course, I'm just kidding about that.) I don't want to wait...don't like it.

Is there plan B? Oh sure, there could be. I can be pretty manipulative when I need to be. I could try that. I'm pretty good at laying on a big guilt trip. I could try that. I could put on my fundraiser hat, and we could turn this place into a circus, and we probably could get the money. But I'm pretty sure that would cost us more than we would gain. You would lose your trust in us as leaders—for valid reasons. You probably in your heart would say, "You know, you people are good at talking about faith, but when push comes to shove, you don't really believe it, do you?" That would be valid too. No, there's no Plan B. Now we watch and we wait.

But when you think about it, what has been created is an environment where we're reminded how dependent upon God we are. We need that. It also has created a wonderful opportunity where we could come back here in August and have quite a celebration when God demonstrates His faithfulness. We need that, too. So we've done our part. Now we watch and we wait, and we see what God does.

In verses 11, 12, and 13, David cries out for God to deal with his enemy.

Do not slay them, or my people will forget; scatter them by Your power, and bring them down, O Lord, our shield. On account of the sin of their mouth and the words of their lips, let them even be caught in their pride, and on account of curses and lies which they utter. Destroy them in wrath, destroy them that they may be no more; that men may know that God rules in Jacob to the ends of the earth. Selah.

Those are very interesting verses. What David is saying is, "God, don't wipe them out—that's way too quick. I want You to take Your time. Make sure that people see the consequences of their choices as they're caught in their lies and their pride and their arrogance. Scatter them about so that everybody will see and learn a lesson."

You see, David understands this isn't just about him and this circumstance; this is about the whole nation learning a lesson. You can't fight God and win, and he wants for people to see that so that they will choose differently.

You know, none of this circumstance had to happen. God could have eliminated Saul in many ways. God could have delivered David in many ways. This really wasn't necessary. But David understands this is about more than just David and Saul. This is about the nation learning a lesson that God rules in Jacob, or in Israel, that God can't be defeated and there are consequences to fighting God. You just can't fight God and win.

Verse 14:

They return at evening, they howl like a dog, and go around the city. They wander about for food and growl if they are not satisfied. (vs. 14-15)

You say that sounds like verses 6 and 7. Well, if you think of this like a song, think of this as the chorus. We've sung the chorus, we went back to a verse, and now we're back to the chorus again. It's not exactly the same, but pretty close. But in this case, I think David, after what he says in verses 11, 12 and 13, is looking at the soldiers through a different lens, and actually, I think he feels sorry for them. I think there's a level of pity because this is what they've chosen for their lives. They're living like dogs. They're eating out of the trash pile. They're biting; they're howling; they're never satisfied.

It's almost as if David can look out the window and see Saul's soldiers and how they're acting. He sees beyond them, and on the horizon is God as the general with this host of angelic army ready to attack the moment God says to come. And he realizes what a sad, pitiful choice that these soldiers have chosen to live this way when God offers them so much more.

The contrast of what he sees in these soldiers is himself:

But as for me, I shall sing of Your strength; yes, I shall joyfully sing of Your lovingkindness in the morning, for You have been my stronghold and a refuge in the day of my distress. O my strength, I will sing praises to You; for God is my stronghold, the God who shows me lovingkindness. (vs. 16-17)

In the middle of what would be really unimaginable circumstances for most of us, David finds himself singing. With joy in his heart, he is singing praises to God because there he has met God and God is his stronghold, his fortress, his safe place. And he knows in his heart everything is going to be okay.

Don't miss the fact that David says he will joyfully sing of God's lovingkindness in the *morning*. You remember what is scheduled to happen at sun up in the morning: these soldiers are to capture David and execute him. What David is saying is, "In that moment when they are to execute me, I will be joyfully singing praises to God because He is my safe place." God has met him there in His lovingkindness, and David is singing praises to God.

When David was talking about a stronghold, a fortress, a safe place, it wasn't geographical. He didn't need to go anywhere else to find that place, because it wasn't geographical. It was right there. God met him in his hour of need.

God's stronghold, God's safe place for you is not geographical. You don't need to live somewhere else. You don't need a different house. You don't need to be married to a different partner. You don't need a different family. You don't need a bigger bank account. You don't need a different job. You don't really need any change in your circumstances whatsoever to find God as your safe place, your fortress, your stronghold. It's not geographical. It's not based on anything else. It's based on the person and the character of God.

One of our problems is when we find ourselves in difficult circumstances, we try to fix it ourselves. We go from option A to option B to option C to option D, and along the way we never really stop and seek God as our safe place. But God has promised that He will meet us there in His lovingkindness and He will be adequate for our every need.

I have a problem with Christians who go through their Christian life with doom and gloom, as if somehow God has fallen from His heaven and everything is a disaster. That is totally inconsistent with everything we say we believe. No matter what your circumstances, no matter what you're going through today, you have every reason to joyfully sing praises unto God because He, in His person and character, has provided for you a safe place. And He will meet you there in His lovingkindness and be adequate for everything you need today.

Our Father, we're thankful that You are so faithful. Lord, so many times we're clicking through one option after another to try to fix whatever it is that is our problem. And in our business to get things fixed, we fail to really seek You as our place of refuge. Lord, it's hard to wait, to watch. Lord, teach us what it means to trust You, to find You as our stronghold, our safe place, our fortress, that You would meet us there in Your lovingkindness. Lord, I pray that we would joyfully sing praises to Your name in whatever circumstances we find ourselves. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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