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He Covers My Head

Psalm 140

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Many years ago in the first couple years of my first church ministry, there was an occasion where different churches from the Sandhills – the pastors, their delegates, members of the congregations – they were all supposed to meet at one particular Sandhills church for a meeting. So we all showed up, and the whole thing was just a disaster – it was poorly attended, there was just a handful of people there, it was poorly organized, poorly put together – I mean, it was just a slow, painful death. And in frustration, I was behind the microphone, and on a whim remembered a story that I had heard recently and decided to share it, hoping to breathe some life into this meeting. As soon as it came out of my mouth, I recognized that was really inappropriate here. But it was already out there, just lying dead on the floor. There was clearly tension in the room, and I just quickly went on, hoping it would go away.

Well, that evening, there were two men in that audience, and they responded very differently to what I had shared. Probably a week passed, and I received a letter from a gentleman I had conversed with many times. He was from a different church; he was an elderly, kind, gentle, godly man. In essence his letter rebuked me for what I had shared in that meeting. And as I read through his letter, I knew immediately that he was right – that what I had shared was inappropriate, it was wrong. I confessed it before God, and I immediately wrote him back a letter and told him that. I apologized to him, I told him I had confessed it before God, and I thanked him for loving me enough to send me the letter. I also tried to contact the other pastors and their delegates to just get the thing straightened out, hopefully learned my lesson, and move on.

I thought that was the end of it. But about a month later I started hearing these strange stories out in the community. What I was hearing was that people were being told that I tell dirty jokes from the pulpit. Now this wasn't a dirty joke by any stretch of the imagination, but it was inappropriate. But what they were being told was that I tell dirty jokes, that I'm corrupt, I'm immoral, I'm disqualified for ministry. And I tracked this and finally figured out that the source was another gentleman that was at the meeting that night. This particular man was highly legalistic – suffocatingly legalistic – and he was convinced that I broke too many of the rules and that God was leading him to get me out of ministry. So he made it his mission to discredit me and my ministry, and, in essence, to bring me down.

Well, it was very painful, but I survived that month or two, and it seemed to kind of go away. I was relieved at that. Well that was only Round 1. Then came Round 2. Round 3. Round 4. Basically, for two years he made it his mission to tell anyone that would listen that I tell dirty jokes from the pulpit, that I'm immoral, that I'm corrupt, that I've got to go. He didn't even live in our community. There was a point in time in that two year window where I was just that close to believing *maybe I have disqualified myself. Maybe I will never outlive this. Maybe I need to pursue a different profession.*

Nobody likes to be maligned. Nobody likes to be slandered. Nobody likes for things to be said about them that aren't true. One of the things that I've recognized over the years, I've just learned to accept: that if you're going to be a leader, people are going to say things about you that aren't true. They are going to misrepresent you, and you have to accept that. It's not just true of preachers – it's true of anybody in leadership. If you're in a position of leadership in the marketplace, you understand this – people say things about you that aren't true. People misrepresent you, people

malign you, people discredit you, and some people make it their mission to bring you down. That's a very painful thing.

But it isn't just leaders; we can widen the swath all the way out. If you are serious about your walk with Jesus and about the mission that God has given us, you have to understand that there is an enemy who has made it his mission to discredit and slander you and to bring you down. I think there is a tendency to think, *If I'm a good Christian, if I'm kind to people, if I'm loving, if I do the right things, people will like me; people will respect me.* But the reality is that just simply is not true. Process it this way: there was a time in history when God actually became flesh. He walked on this earth and He was perfect in every way. He was perfect in His love, perfect in His kindness, perfect in His gentleness, perfect in His integrity, perfect in His leadership, perfect in His character, perfect in every way – the ideal of what everyone should ever strive to be. How did people react? They slandered Him, they maligned Him, they falsely accused Him, they flogged Him, they executed Him. And Jesus was very clear that *the world hated Me, and if you're going to follow Me, you need to know this: the world will hate you.* We live in a world that's opposed to God, and anything that represents God to the world will be maligned and slandered and hated.

Jesus was in essence the ultimate curve wrecker. Do you remember those people when you were in high school or college – everybody else got a 70 on the math test and they get a 100. Nobody liked them – they were the curve wreckers, and there's always got to be one. Well that's what Jesus was. In the first century, the religious crowd thought they had everything in order. They thought that, with these rules and regulations, they had established themselves as being righteous and holy, and everybody believed that. What they didn't know was that they were all getting 70's, and then along comes Jesus, and He gets 100 percent. And suddenly they were busted. These people aren't measuring up – they're falling far short, they're self-righteous hypocrites. Jesus was like a flashlight that, for the first time, had shined light into the dark corners of these peoples' lives, and there were piles of cockroaches that no one had ever seen before. And in that moment they had to make a decision: *either we sweep out the cockroaches, or we distinguish the light.* Jesus himself used that metaphor, and He says their choice was to put the light out.

As a follower of Jesus, it's very much the same. You live according to a different values system. You live according to a different morality and ethic. And in doing that, without even saying a word, you expose the lifestyles of those that oppose God, and they resent that. And the only way they can handle that is to discredit you, to malign you, to bring you down to convince everyone that you're no different than they are.

I think teenagers struggle with this a lot. As a matter of fact, it's a point of real discouragement for many young people. There are many teenagers that live one life at church and a very different life at school. But there are also many teenagers that are passionately, authentically pursuing Jesus, and they want to live a life of obedience at school, at home, at church. But when they choose to live out that obedient lifestyle at school, it exposes those who are two-faced, and they're busted. And they don't like it. And the only way they can process this is that they have to prove that those who are following Jesus are really as artificial as they are. So they seek to bring them down. What discourages a lot of Christian young people is that the attacks often come from other peers who call themselves Christians. But that's why they do that – because you're a curve wrecker, and you're shining the flashlight into the dark corners. There are cockroaches, and they don't like it.

But it's still more than all this – it's deeper than that. We often remind ourselves this isn't a playground – this is a battleground. And we have an enemy whose mission is to seek and destroy anyone who is a follower of Jesus. His weapon of choice is the lie – deceit, slander. As a matter of

fact, Jesus exposed him in John chapter 8. He said, “*We have an enemy – he’s called the devil, and the devil is a liar.*” It’s not just that he’s a liar, it’s his nature – he’s the father of lies. That’s who he is. That’s what defines him. That’s how he functions. As a matter of fact, the name “*devil*” actually means *slanderer*. That’s how he operates. That’s how he fights – those are the bullets. In the New Testament, he’s called *the accuser of the brethren*. Basically his job is to slander, malign, accuse, bring down those people who are the proclaimers of the message of Jesus.

1 Peter describes him as a roaring lion seeking someone to devour. It’s a bit of a sobering thought to realize that we have an enemy on an all-out mission to destroy us, and he’ll do it through slander, through lies, through misinformation, through half-truths – whatever he needs to do to discredit you in order to discredit the message that you proclaim. Now I know what you’re thinking right now. You’re thinking, “*Well I’m sure glad I came this morning – this is really encouraging. Let’s close in prayer. Another nice morning at church.*” Well the reality is that I can’t do anything to change that, and neither can you. That’s the war that we’re engaged in. I can’t stop people from talking. What I can do is control how I respond to the enemy’s attack.

So how do we respond properly to this attack? Well, if you have a Bible, turn with me to Psalm 140. It’s a psalm of David – one of the greatest leaders in history, but also one of the most misunderstood and maligned leaders in history. David will help us a little bit in how to respond when we’re maligned, when we’re misrepresented, when there are those bent in bringing us down.

Verse 1:

Rescue me, O LORD, from evil men; preserve me from violent men (Psalm 140:1; NASB*)

Now, to understand this psalm, you have to understand two key words: *rescue* and *preserve*. What do you think of when you hear the word *rescue*? What I immediately think of is: *I’m in an environment where there are enemies who want to malign and attack me, and I’m asking God to rescue me* – meaning pull me out of that – *and to preserve me* – meaning to put me in a bubble where it will never happen again. Now I’d like that. “God, pull me out; put me in a bubble so nobody can ever do that to me again.” But that’s not what these words mean.

Rescue is actually a military term. It means to fortify. It means to train and equip. It means to make the troops ready for the oncoming attack. So David’s not saying, “God, get me out of here.” He’s saying, “God, fortify me. Do what You need to get me ready, because the enemy’s coming.” Preserve me basically means: God give me what I need in order to protect or maintain that which I’ve been given – to preserve that. For David, it was the fact that he was called to be king, to lead Israel, and he wanted to do that in a godly way. So his prayer is that God would give him what he needs to carry out the responsibility God had given him: to lead the nation of Israel and not to compromise his role.

For us in the new covenant, it would be an understanding that God has said clearly that He is taking the life-changing Gospel of Jesus Christ and He has put it in earthen vessels – clay pots – meaning fallible people. We then are given the responsibility to fulfill the mission of the proclamation of the life-changing message of Jesus. But the only way that our message has credibility is if we as messengers have credibility. So, the prayer would be: *God fortify me, prepare me, strengthen me to take this assignment You’ve given me and carry it out in such a way that I don’t compromise the message by compromising my person.*

Verse 2:

[These violent or vicious men] **Who devise evil things in their hearts; they continually stir up wars.**

The word “devise” means plot, or plan, or scheme. These aren’t people that just misunderstood. These are people that are planning, they’re plotting, they’re scheming. These are people that know they’re sharing misinformation. They know they’re slandering you. They know they’re attacking you - that’s the point. That’s their goal. That’s their mission. They’re doing this on purpose.

He says, “**They continually stir up wars.**” It just means conflict follows them everywhere they go. That’s the way they live their lives. We’ve probably all known people like that. It seems like everywhere this person is, there’s conflict. It’s out in the marketplace. If they’re in this department, there’s conflict. Move them to this department, there’s conflict. At home in their neighborhood, there’s conflict. Well, that’s how he’s identifying these people. Anywhere they go – whatever they’re a part of – there’s continual conflict. That’s their mode of operation. That’s what defines them.

Verse 3:

They sharpen their tongues as a serpent; poison of a viper is under their lips.

It’s very vivid imagery that these people are like snakes and they’re curled up under a rock, and the first thing you see with a snake is that tongue that just comes out and in a mile a minute. Imagine that’s the tongue of that person who wants to malign you and take you down, and that tongue is just going a hundred miles an hour. That’s a picture of these people. They’re giving it their best effort to accomplish their purpose. But at the opportune moment, they’re going to strike, and they’re going to dig their fangs in, and they’re going to deliver the poison. So it’s a very vivid imagery of these people that David is describing.

Verse 4:

Keep me, O LORD, from the hands of the wicked; preserve me from violent men who have purposed to trip up my feet.

The word “trip” basically means – when you’re off balance – to be pushed over. The goal is to find a moment when you’re off balance and push you off your feet. Now, the reality is, if I know you’re coming, and you’re going to push me, and I’m ready for that, I’m going to be a lot harder to move than when I’m off balance. Frankly, if I’m off balance, any one of my daughters could push me over. But if I know they’re coming, if I’m ready for it, if I’m set, it’s probably not going to happen, because I’m big and tough. Maybe my middle daughter, Bobbi, could push me over, but not Ashley or Jayme.

I have found for me – and it’s probably true of you – that when I get in discussions, or meetings, or exchanges with people, and I know it’s going to be difficult, I spend time preparing my heart for that. I get on my game face. I want to be controlled by the Spirit. I will rarely say things in those meeting that I will later regret. I’m ready. Where I get into trouble is when I get ambushed and I didn’t see it coming, and I wasn’t ready for it – I’m off balance and suddenly I’m popping off and saying something I regret, and I’ve compromised

my integrity. That's what he's talking about here. The enemy's just watching; they're waiting for that moment when you're off balance and you're going to get pushed off your feet.

The proud have hidden a trap for me, and cords; they have spread a net by the wayside; they have set snares for me. (verse 5)

Those are all images of ancient traps – whether it's a rope, whether it's a net, whether it's a snare – you just get the imagery that they're out there lurking in the shadows. They're in the road ditch, they're on the path, they're hiding in the shadows, they're in the alley, they're in the corner, and they're waiting for that opportune moment when you least expect it to take you out.

When you think about a trap, what you think about is bait, and the enemy tries to figure out: *What would be the best bait to lure you into the trap?* All of us have buttons, and the enemy's trying to figure out: *What's your button? On the right day, in the right circumstances, if I push that button, I've got you, and you will compromise; and you will demonstrate that this whole message of life change is bogus because you're no different than me.*

It is a sobering reality that the enemy is lurking in the shadows. The enemy's setting snares and traps and nets, and the enemy is studying you, figuring out what your buttons are. On the right day, at the right moment – you just come out of a lousy meeting, you're in a foul mood, things aren't going so well at home, you just had a fight with your boyfriend – and he knows this is the time to push the button, and you go off. And the enemy sits back and says, "You know, I knew it. You're no different than anybody else."

See, the sobering reality of our mission is we are proclaiming a message that says, "My life has been radically changed by the power of Jesus." And to the unbeliever, we are in essence saying, "I'm not like you anymore. I was, but I'm not anymore. I've been changed." But if our reaction, our response in those moments of truth is no different than how they would respond, then our message has no credibility because there's no evidence of life change. And the enemy knows that, so he's setting a trap, he's baiting the hook, he's waiting for the moment.

We can't do anything to change that. What we can do is respond properly, and that's what David talks about.

Verse 6:

I said to the LORD, "You are my God; give ear, O LORD, to the voice of my supplications."

David understands *this is bigger than me*. If I think I just need to grit my teeth and do better, I'm going to fail. But I have to acknowledge, "*God, You're my God. This is about You and Your power and Your strength, and I submit and surrender to You. God, it's Your opinion that matters. God, You know the truth.*" I don't necessarily have to go out there and defend myself. God knows. That's ultimately what matters. So he acknowledges God is his God

Verse 7:

"O GOD the Lord, the strength of my salvation," (verse 7a)

You notice “GOD” is all caps – capital G-O-D – which is Yahweh. God, my personal God, You are my Adonai. You’re my master. God, I’m your slave, You’re my master. You’re in charge; I’m not and I submit and surrender to that. I acknowledge You are the strength of my salvation. The proclamation of the message that God has changed my life through the power of Jesus means that it must be the power of God within me that gives me what I need to respond differently than the rest of the world. This isn’t me, this is God in me. It’s got to be the strength that He brings me. It’s the strength of my salvation that’s going to make the difference.

“You have covered my head in the day of battle.” (verse 7b)

This is a great imagery. In the ancient world, fighting was hand to hand combat. If you wound me in the arm, I’ll survive that. If you wound me in the leg, I’ll get through that. But you level a blow to my head, and it’s fatal. So the strategy was: figure out a way to get something over your head, or you die. So the imagery is: God covers my head; God is my helmet. Paul says the same thing in the New Testament, **“Put on the helmet of salvation,”** that no matter how chaotic the world is around me, God is my helmet; God covers my head; God will protect me. I can’t stop people from talking, but I know that God ultimately knows the truth and God will protect me. My integrity and my character are ultimately in the hands of God. He’s my helmet. And if I believe that by faith, then I don’t have to react; I don’t have to explode; I don’t have to be like them; I don’t have to fight fire with fire. I can respond in a way that’s right and appropriate for the situation.

Imagine if we went to some jungle somewhere, or some third world country, and found someone that was very unfamiliar with modern technology. We bring them back, we put them in a car, and we send that car through an automatic car wash. The initial response would be they would freak out because the world around them is absolute chaos. You’ve got these water jets shooting at you, you’ve got these things spinning, you’ve got things coming at you. I mean, it would be a rather intimidating experience. But somewhere along the way, you would suddenly realize: *Hey, these things can’t get to me. Even though that world out there is chaotic, I’m safe and dry in here.* That’s really the imagery that David is trying to paint – that even though the world out there is full of chaos and war and attacks on you, there is a place where you can go where God is your helmet and by faith you realize *Hey, they can’t take me down. They can’t get to me because God’s got my head covered.*

I understand the purpose that God has given me, and I understand that if I am full-speed ahead, passionately going about that purpose, the enemy can attack me, and he can probably wound me. But the enemy has no ability to deliver a fatal blow. He cannot stop me from accomplishing the purpose God has given me to do, and I have to believe that by faith. The only way I can be stopped is if the enemy sets a trap or a snare and sucks me in, and causes me to compromise my integrity, which compromises the message.

“Do not grant, O LORD, the desires of the wicked; do not promote his evil device, that they not be exalted. As for the head of those who surround me, may the mischief of their lips cover them. May burning coals fall upon them; may they be cast into the fire, into deep pits from which they cannot rise. May a slanderer not be established in the earth; may evil hunt the violent man speedily.” (verses 8-11)

Those are all statements of God’s judgment, and what David is saying is, “God, turn whatever these people are trying to do to me back on themselves. God, hang them with their own rope,

burn them with their own fire, trap them in their own lives.” David isn’t being vindictive here. He’s asking for the righteous to prevail and the wicked to be judged.

Verse 12:

I know...

That’s the key phrase here: *I know this. I believe this. If I don’t believe this, I’ll never respond properly when I’m slandered or maligned.*

I know that the LORD will maintain the cause of the afflicted and justice for the poor. (verse 12)

He picks the weakest and most vulnerable and says, “I know that God will be their protector.”

Surely the righteous will give thanks to Your name; the upright will dwell in Your presence. (verse 13)

This idea of dwelling in the presence of God is recognizing that when we are in those moments – and they’re very hard – rather than reacting, rather than popping off, rather than the cork coming off the bottle, there needs to be a place where I go and I regain my composure, and I remind myself of what’s true, and that is the presence of God. That’s my dwelling place. Many of the psalms would refer to it as “a place of refuge.” It’s my hiding place. It’s not geographical – it’s the person and presence of God.

The idea of the uprightness and the dwelling of God, it’s like the chicken and the egg. Because they’re upright, they seek the presence of God, but it’s because they’re in the presence of God that they walk uprightly. You can’t really separate those out. If you do not learn what it means to find God as your safe place, as your hiding place, your place of refuge, you will never learn what it means to respond properly in those most difficult moments.

There has to be a sense in which you pull back and remember: *Okay, God is my God, and it’s His opinion that matters, and He knows what’s true. He knows my character, He knows my integrity, He knows my motives. He’s the strength of my salvation. It doesn’t come from me – it’s got to come from Him. And God’s got my head covered. The enemy can’t give me a fatal blow, and I need to pull back, take a deep breath, regain some perspective, and respond in a way that’s careful and prayerful.* It doesn’t mean that I always do nothing, but it does mean that I’m very careful and prayerful in how I respond.

During World War II, the Ten Booms took it upon themselves to start taking in Jews who were pursued by the Nazi soldiers in order to be imprisoned and executed. They actually built a room in their house where the entrance was hidden, where these Jews would be housed when the soldiers came to look for them. That room came to be known as “the hiding place,” and for months, they hid Jew after Jew after Jew in this hiding place and saved their lives. But eventually, the Nazi’s figured it out and found the room, and the Ten Booms were arrested. Moments before the arrest, the father gathered the family together, and he reminded his two daughters that from this point on, “God will have to be our hiding place.” He took it from Psalm 119 – God has promised to be our hiding place.

It was a beautiful imagery. What they had experienced literally in this house would now be what they would experience in the person and presence of God. Ten days later, the father died. A few months after that, one of the sisters died. But Corrie Ten Boom survived, and she would go on to tell her story that would be entitled *The Hiding Place*. In 1975, it was made into a movie. In 1981, there was a song written to capture that experience called *You Are My Hiding Place*.

In just a moment, I'm going to close in prayer, and then Katie's going to play that beautiful, haunting melody, *You Are My Hiding Place*. I've always believed the power of that song was in the melody – far more than the words. Imagine, like that car wash scene, that all around you is this chaos, this enemy that's on the attack. But God has provided in His person and His presence this hiding place, this place that is safe and secure where you can remember what's true: That God will be your strength, that God knows the truth, that God will cover your head, that He's going to get you through this.

I would suggest that while Katie plays, you don't watch her, but you close your eyes and seek the presence of God, and listen how the melody paints this beautiful picture of a hiding place in the middle of the chaos. Any time we spend much time dwelling in the presence of God, we are reminded that God is faithful. That song will be followed by a piano solo by Dan of *Great is Thy Faithfulness*, and then we'll move from there to singing that great hymn as we close the service.

Our Father, we're thankful this morning that You are our hiding place, that those who dwell in You walk uprightly. Lord, we understand that we have an enemy that's on the attack that seeks to malign and slander and destroy those who are followers of Jesus. Lord, in that right moment on that right day, we are vulnerable to the attack. In that moment, we can compromise ourselves, which compromises the message of the Gospel. Lord, in these quiet moments, remind us again that You are our hiding place. You are that place that we go to regain our composure, to remember what's true, that we might walk uprightly in a world that's opposed to You. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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