

Soul Thirst

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on March 26, 2023.

Hear my prayer, O LORD;
 give ear to my pleas for mercy!
 In your faithfulness answer me, in your righteousness!
Enter not into judgment with your servant,
 for no one living is righteous before you.

For the enemy has pursued my soul;
 he has crushed my life to the ground;
 he has made me sit in darkness like those long dead.
Therefore my spirit faints within me;
 my heart within me is appalled.

I remember the days of old;
 I meditate on all that you have done;
 I ponder the work of your hands.
I stretch out my hands to you;
 my soul thirsts for you like a parched land. Selah

Answer me quickly, O LORD!
 My spirit fails!
Hide not your face from me,
 lest I be like those who go down to the pit.
Let me hear in the morning of your steadfast love,
 for in you I trust.
Make me know the way I should go,
 for to you I lift up my soul.

Deliver me from my enemies, O LORD!
 I have fled to you for refuge.
Teach me to do your will,
 for you are my God!
Let your good Spirit lead me
 on level ground!

For your name's sake, O LORD, preserve my life!
 In your righteousness bring my soul out of trouble!
And in your steadfast love you will cut off my enemies,
 and you will destroy all the adversaries of my soul,
 for I am your servant (Psalm 143).¹

¹ Unless referenced otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Crossway Bibles, 2001).

Soul Thirst

There is an old saying that goes, “If you go looking for trouble, you’re sure to find it.” Proverbs says, “evil comes to him who searches for it” (Prov. 11:27). But what if you weren’t searching for it? Sometimes even if you aren’t looking for it, trouble finds you. I think of Job, whose trouble began not when he went looking for it, but when God asked Satan, “Have you considered my servant Job?” (Job 1:8). Or David, who was chosen by God, “a man after his own heart,” and anointed king (1 Sam. 13:14), he didn’t go looking for trouble as he followed the Lord faithfully, but it surely found him. Like the witches sing in *Macbeth*, “double, double toil and trouble,” trouble always seems to be abrewing.

That trouble comes is certain, but why it comes and in what variety is a mystery. Neither you nor I know why certain troubles find some and not others. God only knows, and so he says,

call upon me in the day of trouble;
I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me” (Ps. 50:15).

How he delivers and when he delivers is up to him, but we can be sure that he is working out all things for our good and his glory (Rom. 8:28).

Trusting God’s Protection

To our glorious God, David directs his “pleas for mercy,” knowing that while man may persecute us, God upholds, directs, disposes, and governs “all creatures, actions, and things, from the greatest even to the least, by his most wise and holy providence.”² Ultimately, mercy comes not from man but God, whose steadfast love never ceases, whose mercies never end but are new every morning; great indeed is his faithfulness (Lam. 3:22-23) and justice, to which David appeals.

He appeals not to his self-righteousness, because he knows he is a sinner by nature, evidenced by thought, word, and deed. He knows he is deserving of judgment and death. And *we* know what *he* knows, for “no one living is righteous before [God]”: “... no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one” (Rom. 3:10-12). David’s appeal to the Lord then is not self-justifying but penitent. No one is righteous, but “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). And because our forgiveness and cleansing are based on God’s faithfulness and justice, not our own, then we may be sure of it.

But peace with God does not assure us peace with man. So far as it depends on us, we are to live peaceably with all (Rom. 12:18), but that doesn’t mean that all desire to live peaceably with us. This is the case with David, whose plea for mercy to God is to receive mercy from the taunts and terrors of his enemy. And so, he flees, as should we, not into the fray but to the Lord, who is his refuge, a mighty fortress, a “bulwark never failing.”³

² “The Confession of Faith” 5.1, *The Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms* (Lawrenceville: PCA Christian Education and Publications, 2007), 19-20.

³ “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God,” *Trinity Hymnal*, Revised Ed. (Suwanee: Great Commission Publications, 1990), 92.

We do not know the enemy who seeks David's demise, but we do know his ultimate enemy, his adversary, and our adversary, the devil, who "prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour" (1 Pet. 5:8). And prowling, he has hunted David down, crushed him to the ground, leaving him feeling like he is dwelling in darkness, as if the living dead. His life feels lifeless, as if abandoned by the Lord. Of course, the Lord has not abandoned him, but that's what his enemy would have him think. Jesus said, the devil "does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies" (John 8:44). So, we should expect that he will attack us in such a way that would deceive us, leading us to believe lies.

So deceptive are the lies of our enemy that we can begin to wonder what the truth is. The prophet Isaiah believed that he lived in a day characterized by a lack of truth (Isa. 59:115). The prophet Jeremiah felt like truth had "perished" (Jer. 7:28). I would imagine many of us feel like Isaiah and Jeremiah. But while truth may often be in short supply among Adam's progeny, truth has not perished and never will, as Christ is embodied truth (John 14:6), and his Word is eternal truth (John 17:17). Though we may grow weary and feel dismayed by Satan's seemingly incessant attacks, how we feel does not define truth. (Thank God truth is not determined by how I feel!) No, if your life is governed by how you feel, you will fall prey to the preposterous. Don't fall for how you feel, because the world, the flesh, and the devil will prey upon it.

Knowing God's Word

Like David, our enemy pursues us, seeks to crush us, would lead us into darkness, and destroy our very soul if he could. As Martin Luther put it,

For still our ancient foe
does seek to work us woe;
his craft and power are great,
and armed with cruel hate,
on earth is not his equal.⁴

Yet, despite his "craft and power" we are not helpless victims of Satan but heaven-bound victors in Christ. And while on *earth* is not his equal, we "do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places," standing firm in Christ's armor and wielding the sword of his Spirit, which is the Word of God (Eph. 6:12-17).

And though this world, with devils filled,
should threaten to undo us,
we will not fear, for God has willed
his truth to triumph through us.
The prince of darkness grim,
we tremble not for him;
his rage we can endure,
for lo! his doom is sure;

⁴ Ibid.

one little word shall fell him.⁵

It is this spiritual sword, this living and active Word, that is the weapon of Christ's appointment, to be wielded in defense against the onslaught of our enemy.

But to wield the Word we must know it, going to it to remember and meditate on what God has done, pondering the revelation of his inscripturated handiwork. David confesses,

I remember the days of old;
I meditate on all that you have done;
I ponder the work of your hands.

In an age obsessed with progress and elevation of the new over the old, we are not only prone to forget but often encouraged to. But God's timeless Word counters our "chronological snobbery"⁶ with the history of God's sovereign purpose and provision for his people. If you read the Bible from cover to cover, you find that much of Scripture is history, and in it repeatedly, we read the command from God to remember what he has done for his people.

We forget our redemptive-historical past at our peril. In an age of arrogant ignorance, we do not know our history, and we don't want to learn it. We would rather challenge and argue than listen and learn, not realizing that our unwillingness to learn from our ancestors doesn't change history, but it does change us, and not for the better. It is as if we value the presence of our opinion over reflection of the past. And the church is not immune to this malady: I am amazed how little we know about church history and our unwillingness to learn from it, as if we have progressed to a point of superiority, when really we have regressed to a point of stupidity. But this is especially important in our knowledge and understanding of biblical history. As our biblical illiteracy escalates, so does our ignorance of the days of old, what God has done, his historical handiwork. And it's a repetitive problem for the children of God, as the psalmist laments in Psalm 106, "Our fathers . . . did not consider your wondrous works . . . they did not remember the abundance of your steadfast love" (Ps. 106:7). May the same not be said of us.

We go not to God's Word as consumers in the marketplace, but as children of our Father, desiring to know him, his ways, his will. It is our delight to remember, meditate, and ponder upon all that God has done, because we desire to know him, using the mind he has given to glorify him. "Knowledge is indispensable to Christian life and service," writes John Stott. "If we do not use the mind which God has given us, we condemn ourselves to spiritual superficiality."⁷ So, for us the bible is not a once-and-done read, but an ongoing, repeated immersion in the revealed will of God.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (Orlando: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1955).

⁷ John Stott, *Your Mind Matters: The Place of the Mind in the Christian Life* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1972).

Soul Thirst

This is one of the reasons I love to start my day in God's Word. Like David, I love to "hear in the morning of [the Lord's] steadfast love." It's a spiritual discipline that blesses my day and has blessed my life. I have never regretted the time I spend every morning in God's Word.

But it's not just the spiritual discipline of spending time in God's Word but also a teachable heart, as David demonstrates,

Teach me to do your will,
for you are my God!
Let your good Spirit lead me
on level ground!

To know God's will we go to his Word, but we must also be willing to accept it. Just as "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:16-17), we must be willing to be taught, reproofed, corrected, and trained in righteousness. This God does in us through his Word by his Spirit, for the Word is the "sword of the Spirit" (Eph. 6:17), "living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Heb. 4:12). And as God teaches us by his Spirit through his Word, we find that even amidst a wicked people and crooked land, he leads us to "level ground," a "land of uprightness."⁸

But this doesn't mean that we won't feel like we are in the middle of a desert. Life can leave us parched, like dry ground in desperate need of rain. But through his Word, the Lord provides. As Isaiah describes it,

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven
and do not return there but water the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it
(Isaiah 55:10-11).

And so, we go to God's Word, desperate, needy, thirsty, as if life depends upon it, for indeed it does, as "the rule of faith and life,"⁹ we drink deeply from the well of God's infallible provision to quench our soul's thirst.

⁸ Derek Kidner, *Psalms 73-150: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 513.

⁹ "The Confession of Faith" 1.2, *The Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms* (Lawrenceville: PCA Christian Education and Publications, 2007), 3.

Believing God's Promise

As the Lord has revealed himself and his will in his Word, we know his character and his covenant to keep us. Knowing that “he who began a good work in [us] will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ” (Phil. 1:6), we have confidence that in Christ we will persevere to the end. But in the day of trouble, it’s easy to lose sight of this truth, feeling as if God is hiding, only to reveal himself after death. But just as our feelings do not dictate the truth, so God does not hide from us but always preserves us, not for our merits but his righteousness. For, in his steadfast love for us, he has not only crushed our ancient foe but redeemed us as his own. Come what may today, we may confidently say,

The Lord is my helper;
I will not fear;
what can man do to me? (Heb. 13:6)

And boldly sing:

That Word above all earthly powers
no thanks to them abideth;
the Spirit and the gifts are ours
through him who with us sideth.
Let goods and kindred go,
this mortal life also;
the body they may kill:
God's truth abideth still;
his kingdom is forever!¹⁰

Amen.

¹⁰ “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God,” *Trinity Hymnal*, Revised Ed. (Suwanee: Great Commission Publications, 1990), 92.