

Deeper Dependence in Deepest Difficulties.

Toward the end of last year, Barry and I were talking about a preaching series for the New Year. We agreed on, and I trust we were led to, this theme "Deeper." - going deeper in our relationship with God. We felt that with so many conflicts, demands, difficulties and distractions all around us, we need and long for greater depth in their spiritual life and in our relationship with the Lord. We decided to preach on this theme to encourage us all to go deeper into our life of faith and in God.

Of course, at the time, we had no idea that Barry, having just been installed as our lead pastor, would be diagnosed with cancer. Our whole church family has been deeply moved by the news of Barry's diagnosis and the difficulties he and Lee are facing. At the same time, if you get our church prayer letter, you know that there are also other people facing life-dominating health issues and other difficulties. Even when something doesn't hit us anywhere near as hard as a cancer diagnosis, we all face difficulties, and we all face things we just don't understand. *What does it mean to go deeper in times of difficulty?* Through inspired stories and songs and straightforward scripture, God, in the Bible, helps us learn how to face these things. This morning, we're going to look at this Psalm to conclude this series of message by looking at the theme of *Deeper Dependence in the face of our Deepest Difficulties*. The lessons of the Psalm are not hard to understand even if they are sometimes challenging to apply.

Psalm 142 is a Psalm of David. David is a significant character in the story of Scripture, chosen by God to be the king, he was an imperfect man yet he pursued God and was blessed by God. Some psalms have what is called a superscription, meaning something written before the body of the Psalm. Look at how **Psalm 142** begins. It says it is *A maskil of David*. "Maskil" means this is a Psalm that imparts wisdom. It goes on to describe the setting *When he was in the cave*. 1 The cave is something real that happened in the life of this man, David. It's

historical. At the same time, it's no less symbolic of a season of deep difficulty, and this is how it can speak to all of us.

And when you consider this in light of the larger story of King David, the first lesson is one that the Bible emphasizes over and over again, but I think many of us really struggle to accept. It is simply this:

I. GOD'S WAYS ARE SOMETIMES DIFFICULT TO UNDERSTAND.

When David first appears in the Bible has been chosen to be the future king by God and anointed by the prophet Samuel. He defeats the most formidable enemy of God's people, the giant warrior Goliath. He becomes the husband of the king's daughter, Michal, and best friend of the king's son, Jonathon. The army revered him. The women sing his praises. Everything he touched turned to gold. Then, a strange thing happened. One by one, all these good things began to be stripped away. Saul got jealous, went crazy, and started trying to kill David. David ends up losing everything. He has to flee for his life into the wilderness. Before he ends up in the cave of Adullam, two things happen that are somewhat controversial, but I believe in each of them, David may have lost something that deepened his difficulties.

1. The first one occurs in **1 Samuel 21**, right after he has to run for his life from Saul. He goes to the village of Nob to Ahimelech, the high priest of the nation of Israel, to get food and a weapon because he knows the sword of Goliath has been kept there as a trophy. When Ahimelech sees David come in without soldiers, food, or equipment, he asks questions. David lies to him. Some think this is an example of a justified lie because David is basically at war and in war lying like a fake handoff in a football is just part of the game. I don't think this fits this story. While David is at war with Saul, so to speak, He isn't lying to an enemy but to a friend. Some suggest that this lie is OK because David is lying to protect Ahimelech so that he can tell Saul he didn't know what David was doing. The problem is when Saul hears, and Ahimelech claims ignorance, the lie does not save him. Saul has him and 85 other priests related to him murdered. When one of Ahimelech's sons escapes and tells David what happened, David says, *"I am responsible for the death of your father's whole family ."* There is something else about this when David lies, he doesn't lie once but

three times. In the Bible, that often means something. Jesus prayed three times in the garden of Gethsemane. Jesus asked Peter three times if he loved him. The number three is a thorough number, a number of fullness. David *thoroughly* lied not to an enemy but to an innocent friend. By merely going to that friend, he caused him and 85 of his family members to be murdered. Soon after this, David wrote a Psalm (Psalm 34) in which he said: *if you desire to see good days, keep your lips from speaking lies*. What do you think David might have lost through that experience? I believe he has lost something of the simplicity and the clarity of the childlike faith with which he had faced Goliath. Maybe you could even say he lost a bit of his innocence.

2. The second thing happens before David even hears about the consequences of his lies to the high priest. **1 Samuel 21:10-13** tells how David thinks he will be safe from Saul by fleeing to enemy territory. But the Philistines recognize him. They bring him to the king and say, "This is David. He's the one the women sing about. They celebrate how many of us he has killed". The Hebrew says David was very much afraid so **verse 13** says, *So he changed his behavior before them and pretended to be insane in their hands and made marks on the doors of the gate and let his spittle run down his beard*. So the king basically says this can't be the great David. Get this crazy man out of here. So David escapes, but I think he loses something. *He had already lost his innocence; now he lost his dignity*. I know, I know, I would pretend to be crazy to escape an enemy. I might not have to pretend much. But I think that while David is delivered from the enemy, he must be feeling a little bit different than he did back when he stood before Goliath and spoke so bravely, *"I come to you in the name of the LORD of host,"* He prevailed and rode home to the songs of the women celebrating his power. He doesn't look powerful, acting crazy with spit running down his beard. He is the chosen king, but he has lost his security, his wife, his best friend, his innocence, and his dignity, and then he ends up hiding in a cave. What would you be thinking?

We actually know what went on in David's heart because he tells us. Look at **verse 4**. It says, *Look to the right and see: there is none who takes notice of me; no refuge remains to me; no one cares for my soul*. What we can relate to in the story is not the physical cave but all that it represents. How does David feel? He feels alone, **verse 4**: *"No one*

cares for me". He is desperate in **verse 6**, "*I am brought very low.*" He feels overmatched in **verse 6** again; "*they are too strong for me.*" **1 Kings 15:4** says, *The LORD loved David*. Can a person chosen and loved by the LORD be in such deep distress?

I remember reading an article once by a woman who had been a co-host on a Christian television show where they were frequently promising that if you just believe in Jesus and send a generous gift of money, you will experience health, wealth, and prosperity. She told how she became friends with a woman in her twenties who had cancer and MS; one day, the woman said: "The thing I hate about what you do is you always present people whose marriages get better in 10 minutes, people who get healed, people who have nice packaged answers." She said: "What about people like me who are sick and still love God?" The woman who was the co-host on the show later wrote, "*She changed my perspective ... I think one of the greatest gifts we can give is just a dose of reality....*" ² You see the reality that comes through in the stories in the Bible, is that God doesn't always give quick and easy answers. He always gives us himself, but he often works in ways we do not understand. You could almost say the definition of a superficial relationship with God is a relationship in which you will not accept what you do not understand. What is necessary for a deeper relationship with God is a willingness to accept mysteries and endure uncertainties.

I. IF GOD'S WAYS ARE SOMETIMES DIFFICULT TO UNDERSTAND, WHAT ARE WE SUPPOSED TO DO?

Look at **Psalm 142:1**. *A Maskil of David, when he was in the cave. A Prayer. With my voice, I cry out to the LORD; with my voice, I plead for mercy to the LORD.*

A. We Cry Out To the LORD.

Our difficulties often prompt us to pray in ways that our blessings don't. I wonder if David prayed as earnestly when he strolled around on the roof of his palace and saw Bathsheba as he did when he was in The Cave? Perhaps if he had, his story would have turned out even

better than it did. We don't like it, but it's the truth of scripture and experience that sometimes God's children are at their best spiritually when they are in deep difficulty. The seriousness with which he prays comes through in the repetition *with my voice I cry out, with my voice I plead*. It's good to pray out loud. That's what this is talking about when he stresses his voice. God hears the prayers in our hearts, but sometimes it's just good to give voice to your supplications. The word "plead" is related to the word for supplications. To make supplication is to make an appeal to compassion and mercy. There's an old saying *there's often more that you can do after you have prayed, but there's nothing more that you can do until you have prayed*.

In our prayer, God encourages us to share both our outward difficulties and our inward anxieties. Verse 2, I pour out my complaint before him; I tell my trouble before him. The words *Pour out* and *tell* are the opposite of shutting down or clamming up. Twice, he uses the little phrase "*before him.*" There is no sense in pretense in His presence. The difficult ways of God can bring you to the point where you either get real with God or go very wrong. The word "complaint" in Hebrew doesn't have the same note of bad temper and blame casting as the English word; it could be translated as "*my troubled thoughts.*"

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Hebrews 4 tells us Jesus is a Savior who sympathizes with us in our weakness. Then **verse 16** says, *Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.* Let that sink in. The gospel tells us that boldness and access to God doesn't depend on our goodness but on Jesus. When we trust in him, he lifts us in our brokenness and gives us his righteousness and secures us acceptance with and access to the God who is our refuge, who draws near to us in our times of need.

We pray. We cry out to God. Then...

B. We Take Refuge in God.

Verses 3-5: *When my spirit faints within me, you know my way! In the path where I walk they have hidden a trap for me. Look to the right and see: there is none who takes notice of me; no refuge remains to me;*

no one cares for my soul. ⁵ I cry to you, O LORD; I say, "You are my refuge, my portion in the land of the living."

We have to face our deep need for God. He says, *My spirit faints, God knows the way, there are enemies and traps and notice the phrase I look to the right and see there is none who takes notice of me.* You've heard the phrase, *"he's my right-hand man."* Your right side is the place for your trusted ally, your defender, your protector. David looks where he would hope for help and sees no one there. He has nothing. So he says *no refuge remains to me.*

Our friend Tommy Clayton at GraceLife in Deltona made a great point from this passage. I'm paraphrasing. He said, *"We all have something or something that we look to for security. That's sort of the thing "at our right hand." And the painful truth is we are hardwired to make our source of safety, security, and peace something other than God. Difficulties come, and we don't like it, but we think we're OK because we've got this thing as our refuge. What is it for you? How would you finish this sentence, "I'm OK because_____." I'm smart, I'm pretty, I've got money in the bank, I've got an awesome family, I've got my health, I've got a great job, I'm about to retire?"*

Sometimes, in difficulty, we look to where *we might hope for help*, and *nothing earthly* makes our situation OK. We discover that there is no substitute for God, that can adequately give us the security and the support we need. Every other earthly refuge to which we might cling or for which to which we might look is inadequate. Friends, family, plans, and savings can all be blessings for which we can be thankful when they are present. They can never be the refuge on which we ultimately rely. We have to go deeper into dependence on God. So having just said, *"I have no refuge*, David in **verse 5** says, *"O LORD, you are my refuge!"*

We have to choose to trust in God. I remember the story of a man who was going through depression. He decided to sign up for the *Outward Bound* program, which takes people out for wilderness experiences that test them and build confidence through adventure. Well, the thing he knew was coming but dreading the most was

rappelling down a cliff. In the middle of the week, one of the instructors backed him up to the edge of a 110-foot high cliff. She tied on a rope, gave him some instructions, and told him to go. He went over the edge but slammed into the rock ledge with bone-jarring force about four feet down. His problem was he was trying to hug the cliff. They were yelling at him, *"The only way it works is if you lean way back on the rope."* He kept trying to hug the mountain, and every time he came to a ledge, he slammed into the cliff face again. Then he got really scared and stuck. He hung there for a long time before the instructor said, *"I think it's time you learned the motto of Outward Bound."* Here's what she yelled to him: *"If you can't get out of it, get into it."* He said he realized he couldn't get out of it. There was no way out of his dilemma except to lean back on the rope, putting all his weight on it, trusting it to hold him as he got on with it. In minutes, he was safely down the cliff. In **verse 4**, when David says, *"I have no refuge."* He is saying there is no way out of his situation. But then, in **verse 5**, he says to God, *"You are my refuge."* Because there is no way out, he goes deeper into God. This is how we grow deeper and stronger spiritually. You lean back even more fully on the promises of God. You go more deeply into your relationship with God. You go into deeper prayer, deeper faith, and, yes, deeper surrender to God.

Psalm 57 is also a *Psalm of David* when he fled from Saul into the cave. It helps us understand this. Beginning in **verse 7**, he says: *My heart, O God, is steadfast, my heart is steadfast.* When you say, *"My heart is steadfast,"* He prays to God, preaches to Himself, and wakes up his faith in God. **Verses 7-9:** *my heart is steadfast; I will sing and make music. 8 Awake, my soul! Awake, harp and lyre! I will awaken the dawn. 9 I will praise you, Lord, among the nations; I will sing of you among the peoples.* Do you know why you can make that choice, that commitment? Look at **verse 10:** *For great is your love, reaching to the heavens; your faithfulness reaches to the skies.* God's love and faithfulness cannot be measured or exhausted. It never fails. Do not say, *"When hardship or mysteries come, I call into question the love of God."* Hold on to the certainty of God's great love and faithfulness so that in difficulties that are hard to understand you can say, *"my heart is steadfast because God's is faithful."*

Cry out to God, find refuge in God, then...

C. We Go On For God As He Leads Us.

This story of David in the cave marks a turning point. **1 Samuel 22:1**, says, *David escaped to the cave of Adullam...* but then it adds, *everyone who was in distress, and everyone who was in debt, and everyone who was bitter in soul, gathered to him. And he became commander over them.* And there were with him about four hundred men. This verse reminds us of the invitation of Jesus in **Matthew 11:28**, where he said, *“Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”* The motley crew of distressed people drawn to David in the cave, as his own heart is recalibrated to a deeper reliance on God, ends up becoming what will later be called David's mighty men. God, through them, begins to give David a power base of men who look to him as their true king. David gets stronger. He starts taking responsibility to care for others. He takes care of his family and leads his growing band of followers. At the end of our reading, in **1 Samuel 22:5**, the prophet Gad gives David his new orders. God is working, leading him into a new beginning. That's how he works in our lives, too.

CONCLUSION

God works graciously, faithfully, and wisely in ways we do not understand. We are reminded of this when we take Communion. In Jesus God worked in such an unexpected way to bring us redemption. God came into our world in Jesus and he was not celebrated as a king and a Savior. He was betrayed by friends and murdered like a criminal. He didn't just go into a cave. He went down into the darkness of his own mysterious agony on the cross. He suffered for us, to pay for our sins so that we can be saved not through our own performance or righteousness or good works but by his undeserved grace received just by faith alone - the gift of God! They put him in a tomb – sort of like a cave. They didn't know that God can be powerfully present and do awesome things in tombs and caves. In the end all his promises will be filled for all of eternity. Believe that. And your heart can be steadfast because he is your refuge, and you can fully trust in him.

Amen.

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- 1 *There are three psalms that relate to this general period in David's life. There may be more, but these three are clearly identified as such: Psalms 34, 57, and 142*
 - 2 Sheila Walsh, "Staying Alive," *Leadership Journal*, Summer 2002
 - 3 Derek Kidner, *Psalms 73-150*, p 473