

Desperate Times, Wise Measures

Psalm 56

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Many religious phrases have become a part of the normal language of everyday life, with many not realizing their origin. I remember several years ago when I was doing a Bible reading plan with my students, and one of them texted me one morning and said, “Lincoln plagiarized Jesus!” She had just read where Jesus said that “A house divided against itself cannot stand.” Many don’t realize that “the golden rule” (Do unto others as you would have them do unto you) is also a quote from Jesus’ sermon on the mount.

A few other phrases you may not realize had their genesis in the Bible are:

- The writing on the wall—comes from the account of a hand writing on the wall in Daniel 5
- A fly in the ointment—a proverb from Ecclesiastes 10:1
- The blind leading the blind—Jesus again in Matthew 15:14
- Wolf in sheep’s clothing—also from the sermon on the mount in Matthew 7:15
- Scapegoat—comes from the Biblical instructions about the Day of Atonement in Leviticus 16.

There are lots of religious phrases that become a part of everyday life. As I was thinking about this idea, I thought of one phrase often used in sports of a desperate attempt when all hope is lost: throwing up a Hail Mary. If you have a bit of familiarity with the Catholic faith, you probably know that a Hail Mary is a specific prayer Catholics pray. When someone throws up a wild last-second shot or throws a pass in the direction of the endzone, they call it a Hail Mary, because the only hope of success is to pray! Many don’t realize that’s what they’re really saying when they talk about a Hail Mary play, otherwise I suspect they’d try to change the name!

Psalm 56 records David’s prayer in a time of desperation. He didn’t pray a Hail Mary, but he did turn to the Lord as his only hope of rescue. But what we’ll see about his prayer is that it wasn’t a desperate hope, like throwing a pass toward the endzone and hoping the right guy manages to catch it, but it was a confident, assured choice, a recognition that his best hope was the Lord. It’s a good reminder for us when we face desperate times as well.

Background

Psalm 56 is one of the psalms that gives us a bit of back story in its introduction. Here is what it says:

For the choir director: A psalm of David, regarding the time the Philistines seized him in Gath. To be sung to the tune “Dove on Distant Oaks.” (Psalm 56, NLT)

David wrote this psalm about the time he was seized by the Philistines in Gath. God had promised David he would be the next king of Israel, but He did so while the current king,

Saul was still living. There was a delay of many years between when David was promised he would be the next king and when King Saul died and David took over.

During that time Saul started to see David as a threat and devoted a great deal of time and energy to trying to kill David. This psalm was written when David was all alone and on the run from Saul and his army, who were in hot pursuit only a few days behind him. He had stopped in Nob, where the priest, Ahimelech, gave him food and gave him the only weapon he had, which was the sword of Goliath, the giant David had slain several years prior. David was betrayed in Nob and had to flee again. He ended up in Gath.

Gath was Goliath's hometown. Imagine how desperate David was to think his best option was to go to the town where he was famous for having killed their greatest warrior, their hometown hero. And to do so while holding his sword (which was surely very distinctive and probably oversized for David)! This was the height of desperation! In 1 Samuel 21, where we read this story, we discover the people recognized David immediately and reported him to the king of the city. David was deathly afraid of what might happen next.

David's Response

Despite David's fear and feelings of helplessness, we see what he chose to do in Psalm 56—he chose to pray. His prayer is a very honest one, where we see his struggle to cling to his faith in the midst of a desperate situation.

¹ O God, have mercy on me, for people are hounding me. My foes attack me all day long. ² I am constantly hounded by those who slander me, and many are boldly attacking me. (Psalm 56:1-2, NLT)

David prays to God and begs for mercy. Notice the language he uses as he describes how he feels. He says people are hounding him, his foes attack him all day long, he is constantly hounded by those who slander him, and many are boldly attacking him. David is exhausted. He feels like everywhere he turns, he is being attacked and that he cannot simply run away from those who wish him harm.

Life sometimes feels that way, doesn't it? There are times when you're exhausted because you feel like everywhere you turn there are problems. There are times when you feel like you will be hammered no matter what you do, when people are going to twist anything you say or do and try to make you look bad. And sometimes, it feels like everyone you encounter is trying to hurt you.

That's how David felt too. But his response was not to sulk or whine or complain. His response wasn't even to justify himself. Instead, his response was to turn to the Lord.

This psalm is somewhat unique, because it contains a refrain, a phrase that is repeated (kind of like how we would repeat a chorus in a song). Here is David's refrain

³ But when I am afraid, I will put my trust in you. ⁴ I praise God for what he has promised. I trust in God, so why should I be afraid? What can mere mortals do to me? (Psalm 56:3-4, NLT)

In the midst of David's fear, we see him clinging to his faith. He reminds himself that no matter what happens, he has no reason to fear, because the One in whom he trusts (the Lord) is greater than anyone who may be against him.

This is the right response to times of fear and desperation. Rather than searching for clever answers or tactics that might deliver us, we should turn first to the Lord. And as those times of uneasiness, fear, and desperation come upon us, like David we should remember that in God's hands we are safe.

David's Plea

David reminded himself that the Lord was in control and he could rest in that truth, but he didn't stop there. He still asked God to help.

⁵ They are always twisting what I say; they spend their days plotting to harm me.

⁶ They come together to spy on me— watching my every step, eager to kill me.

⁷ Don't let them get away with their wickedness; in your anger, O God, bring them down. (Psalm 56:5-7, NLT)

David recounts the charges he has against his enemies, and you can once again hear the exhaustion in his words. He feels like he has been on the run forever, he feels like he just can't get a break from everything, and he is at his wit's end.

So, he asks the Lord to intervene. He asks God not to let these evil people get away with their wickedness, and to ultimately bring them down. David had surely discovered that despite all his military victories and wise military prowess, he couldn't handle this problem on his own. I'm curious how often David had prayed about the situation to this point. Was this a prayer he prayed after a long time of trying to do things himself? Or was this a prayer that he had been praying for some time, asking, begging for the Lord to help him? We can't be sure, but either way, we see David coming to a place of faith and a recognition that he was powerless without the Lord.

This is actually a very powerful place for us to be! Paul said, "When I am weak, then I am strong!" In other words, our greatest strength comes from recognizing our own weakness and instead turning to the Lord for help. That's what is necessary for salvation: realizing that no matter how hard we try, we will never be able to erase our sin, and we need a Savior in Jesus. But it's true in each day of our lives as well. We must remember that no matter how clever we think we are, how much we know, or how hard we work, we are ultimately most powerful when we come to the Lord for help rather than trying to do things on our own. Be honest with Him about how you feel, ask for His help, but also rest in the knowledge that He is good, He hears you, and He will act in His timing...which is better than ours.

The Lord Sees

Verse 8 contains wonderfully poetic and beautiful promises that many of us need to hear, especially when we are in the midst of a trial.

⁸ You keep track of all my sorrows. You have collected all my tears in your bottle. You have recorded each one in your book. (Psalm 56:8, NLT)

David reminds us that the Lord is not distant when hard times come. It is not that the Lord has forgotten about us or doesn't care about us. On the contrary, David's describes the Lord as collecting all our tears. He sees our hardships; He hasn't forgotten about them. He loves us and is right beside us in the hardest and darkest times of our lives.

What a beautiful picture this is! But if the Lord cares so much, why does He allow these hard times to come in the first place? If He really cared, wouldn't He spare us of these? Not necessarily. I think there are several reasons God might allow hard times to come.

First, to strengthen us. If you've ever tried to get stronger or healthier, you know it doesn't happen easily, and it usually doesn't happen quickly. And if you just keep doing the same thing, you'll never get stronger. Real strength is built when you push yourself to the limits of what you can currently do. When you do that consistently, you begin to expand your limits. The same is true for our faith. It is only when our faith is stretched to its limits that it can truly grow. So sometimes the Lord is giving us a chance to grow stronger through hardships.

Second, to teach us. If you've ever worked with a child who is struggling to read or learn a new concept, you know it's often a frustrating endeavor. I know through the years there have been many tears as we've sat working on something that didn't come easily to my children. But am I being cruel by forcing them to struggle (even to the point of tears) with a new concept? No! I know the struggle is necessary for them to learn these things that will help them later. Sometimes the Lord allows us to struggle because it's the only way we can learn some lessons. We will never learn the strength we have in the Lord as long as we're able to rely on our own. So sometimes He takes us to places where we're in way over our heads, so we have to learn to rely on Him.

Third, to correct us. I don't know about you, but sometimes I can be stubborn. I can get an idea in my head and keep going that way no matter what. When we are going the wrong way, it's actually loving for the Lord to do whatever He needs to in order to get our attention and get us to change course. The hardships He allows are far less damaging than the consequences we might invite if we keep going the same direction.

Finally, sometimes it's something we can't understand. God loves us, He cares for us, He aches when we hurt, and He has a reason for hard times. But sometimes, we aren't able to know the reason. Job is the quintessential example of this. God didn't explain His reasoning to Job. He just asked Job to trust Him. Sometimes, the Lord may be using our hardship to teach others. Sometimes He's setting something up that will happen far into the future. Other times, we may never know the reason why in this life. And often, I think we simply couldn't understand God's motives even if He explained them to us. But what we do know is that the Lord is faithful and He loves us.

David understood this, even in the midst of his tears and suffering. He knew that the Lord still saw him, had not abandoned him, and would hear and respond to his prayer.

Confidence

David expresses this confidence in the concluding section of the psalm.

⁹ My enemies will retreat when I call to you for help. This I know: God is on my side! ¹⁰ I praise God for what he has promised; Yes, I praise the Lord for what he has promised. ¹¹ I trust in God, so why should I be afraid? What can mere mortals do to me? (Psalm 56:9-11, NLT)

Even in his desperation, David continued to express confidence in the Lord. He knew that the Lord would ultimately deliver him. He knew that God would keep His promises. He knew that this chapter wasn't the end of the story, so he continued to hold on to those truths.

We also see David's refrain once more: He will praise the Lord for His promises, and if his faith is in the Lord, he has no reason for fear. What a wonderful declaration of faith in a time when faith was hard to come by. There is great value in repeating certain truths to yourself to find strength. Dad often talked about how he would recite: God is in control, He loves me, and He never makes a mistake. David's refrain kept the truth of God's character constantly before His eyes—we would be wise to do something similar.

But as he wraps up the psalm, we see another surprising twist.

¹² I will fulfill my vows to you, O God, and will offer a sacrifice of thanks for your help. ¹³ For you have rescued me from death; you have kept my feet from slipping. So now I can walk in your presence, O God, in your life-giving light. (Psalm 56:12-13, NLT)

We don't know if David wrote this psalm during his time in Gath, or whether he wrote it later while reflecting on his time there. As I read these words, they sound like they were written in the midst of struggle, so I'm inclined to think they were penned during that time. If so, this final section is astounding to me, because David speaks as though the Lord's deliverance had already occurred!

David had such confidence that the Lord would keep His promises that he could make plans for how he would celebrate God's deliverance even while he was in the thick of his trial. David had an unshakable faith that the Lord would keep His promises and that the outcome was assured, even if he couldn't understand how at this point. This is the beauty of faith. Faith is not confident because we understand how all the pieces will go together, but because we understand the One who is ordering them. David knew the Lord was ordering the events of his life, so even though he was exhausted and didn't understand, he could rejoice, because his trust was in the Lord.

Conclusion

There's an old saying (this one doesn't come from the Bible) that says desperate times call for desperate measures. David was facing a desperate time while he was in Gath.

And he did end up using some desperate measures to survive (he pretended to be crazy so the king of Gath would see him as a nuisance rather than a threat), but that's not the lesson we should learn. David's deliverance and his confidence weren't in his schemes, but in his Lord. So let's talk about some wise measures we can take in desperate situations.

First, we should pray. This is often our last resort, the "Hail Mary" we throw up when we've exhausted all our other options. But that shouldn't be the case. Real strength is found when we recognize our need for the Lord's help. We should come to God about all the things on our hearts. Confess your frustration, your exhaustion, your fear, and your struggle to trust. Ask Him to intervene on your behalf, to do the things that only He can do. And then ask Him to help you to be faithful, to trust, and to keep doing what you know is right.

Second, choose to focus on God, not your circumstances. There is great power in realizing we have a choice of what thoughts we choose to dwell on. We can choose to put the bad things on repeat: I'll never be good enough, things will never get better, there's no hope, no one cares about me, I shouldn't even bother anymore because nothing will change. Or we can choose to replay the things we know to be true. That's the advice Paul gave in Philippians,

⁸ And now, dear brothers and sisters, one final thing. Fix your thoughts on what is true, and honorable, and right, and pure, and lovely, and admirable. Think about things that are excellent and worthy of praise. ⁹ Keep putting into practice all you learned and received from me—everything you heard from me and saw me doing. Then the God of peace will be with you. (Philippians 4:8,9, NLT)

We can choose to recite God's promises, to replay the ways we've seen His faithfulness, to redouble our efforts at doing what we know is right, to remember that if the Lord is with us, nothing can stand against us. This was what David did with his refrain in Psalm 56. If we choose to dwell on God's promises, we will have peace, even in desperate times. But peace comes only when we stop looking at our circumstances and start looking at the One who controls them.

Third, remember you're not alone. In the dark times of life, it can feel like you are all alone, that no one sees you, no one cares about you, and that no one can possibly understand. And we can even convince ourselves that the Lord doesn't either. But remember what David said—the Lord sees and treasures every tear that falls. He never lets us walk alone. He loves you and cares for you and has a plan that is good for you. No matter what you face, you are never alone. He is right beside you.

Trying times are a part of life, and sometimes life beats you down so much that you are just exhausted. In desperate times, don't resort to desperate measures, think wisely. Work at taking your focus off your circumstances and putting it on the Lord. Then you can have peace, and even rejoice, in the midst of those times, because you know the Lord, who loves you, sees you, cares for you, and is more powerful than anything else in the world, is in control.

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