

The Faithfulness of God

Psalm 107

The Steadfast Love of the Lord... (1-3)

We are faced with a lot of questions these days – especially these days, where there is an endless array of choices before us. From the moment you wake up you must decide – what to wear, what to have for breakfast, questions at work, what to do after work, was Michael Jackson poisoned, will Jon and Kate really get divorced, who will Britney Spears date next, and who will win the Super Bowl this year? Is the Obama stimulus working, do we need more Marines in Afghanistan, and what should we do about so-called gay marriage? Then something really big happens – like 9/11, or Katrina, or your mother’s death by cancer – and the *really* big questions rise up. Where is God? Who is God? Does God care about me? Is there even a God at all?

Questions about God tend to get drowned out in the midst of the cacophony of everyday life. But there are times when the overwhelming importance of Michael Jackson, or even the war in Afghanistan, suddenly recede into the vague recesses of our thoughts, as we face the ultimate questions of life and death. These are times when we really need a God, if there is one – when we wake up and realize that all the heroic talk about being captain of my soul and master of my fate is a bunch of rubbish. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn knew that there was no possibility of escape from Stalin’s gulag, the passengers on flight 93 knew they would not survive the trip, and millions have watched helplessly as their loved ones slipped into death. At times like these you either turn to God for your strength and comfort, or you curse God for abandoning you, or you conclude there is no God after all.

In the chaos of this broken world God speaks. God declares that He is present, He is powerful, and He cares for His creation. God speaks in a gentle voice in the whispering breeze, and in an angry shout in the hurricane. He reveals His artistry in colorful flowers, and His humor in monkeys. God proves year by year that He loves us by sending rain and sun, and maintaining a healthy climate in spite of human activity. But God speaks with the clearest voice in the scripture, and in Psalm 107 He declares over and over that He knows our troubles, He cares about us, and He will rescue us in the end.

The theme of this psalm is the refrain that is repeated throughout: the steadfast love of the LORD endures forever. It opens the psalm in verse 1, and is repeated in verses 8, 15, 21, 31 and the last verse. If you compare other English translations, you will find instead of “steadfast love,” “mercy” (KJV), “loving-kindness” (NAS), “love” (NIV), and similar words. The Hebrew word behind all these terms is **רַחֲמִים**. As you might expect, it has no direct English equivalent – thus the various ways of attempting to capture its meaning for us. “Love” will not do, for there are other Hebrew words which mean love directly. Scholars agree that this word carries overtones of faithfulness, especially to those close to you. Loyalty is part of the meaning of this word. It is more than sympathy toward those in need, or passion for one who attracts you. One person translates it “covenant faithfulness” – the love between a man and a woman covenanted in marriage, the love between David and Jonathan covenanted in friendship, the love between master and servant covenanted in a bond of mutual service. It implies affection linked with acts of kindness in a permanent relationship.

This idea of covenant faithfulness is enhanced by linking **רַחֲמִים** with LORD. Following ancient convention, this word, all in caps, is the polite replacement for the personal name of God. Out of reverence for the majesty of God, the Hebrew people came to refuse to pronounce this name. This is the name that God gave Moses at the burning bush when Moses boldly asked God for His name. In an amazingly intimate act of self-revelation, God told Moses His name was Yahweh. Then He said,

“Say this to the people of Israel, ‘The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.’ This is my name forever, and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations.” (Exodus 3:15)

God linked this name with the people of the covenant. Yahweh is God’s personal, covenant name. This is the name that only God’s own people know. This is the family name of God, that no one may use but His own children. The name Yahweh is a recognition of the unbreakable bond of love between God and his people. So the **סֶדֶק** of **יְהוָה**, the steadfast love of the LORD, is the eternal, unbreakable passion and commitment of God toward the people He has taken as His own children.

Psalms 107 is an exploration of the many ways in which God demonstrates this amazing love bond to us. After the introduction in verses 1-3 four stanzas display four different calamities from which God rescues His people. In each one we are admonished thus:

Let them thank the LORD for his steadfast love,
for his wondrous works to the children of men

Then we have two stanzas in which God’s covenant faithfulness is revealed in nature and in society. The last verse is final call to “thank the LORD for his steadfast love, for his wondrous works to the children of men.”

In the Desert (4-9)

Who here has ever been lost in a desert? OK, who has seen one of those movies in which characters get lost in the desert? Remember the desperate agony of going hour by hour in deadly thirst? Sometimes they are tormented by a mirage, but not until the plot requires it do they escape the grip of the desert. Maybe you have been really thirsty. Magnify that 500 times and you get the idea of what it is like to be trapped in the desert.

I think my thirstiest experience was traveling in Morocco. It was 110° that day. Thirty people died of heat exhaustion in Marakesh. It was during the Fast of Ramadan, so no one was allowed to eat or drink from sunup to sundown. That rule did not apply to non-Muslim foreigners, but we had decided to refrain from drinking in public anyway as a courtesy to the Moroccans. But after a 3 hour ride in a bus with the windows all closed, we were desperate with thirst. We stumbled out of the bus and ran to the nearest café for a Coke. All pretense of care for the opinions of Moroccans vanished in the powerful need for a drink. That experience was just the beginning of thirst. I cannot imagine the horror of going hour by hour without water, slowly going insane as my body shut down and died.

In real life, without a script writer to come to the rescue, people die in the desert. When you are 100 miles from civilization and your car has stalled, death is only a few hours or a few days away. No one knows where you are, no one knows how to find you, and there is no escape. But God says there *is* someone who knows where you are. God knows your plight. God knows how to find you. And God cares about you.

No one here this morning is dying in the desert. But some of you or your loved ones may be dying of something else. Perhaps you have lost your job, run through all your savings, lost your house, and are deep in debt. Jobless, homeless, penniless, you are hopeless in this world. If God is so loving, why did He let all this happen to you? Perhaps others of you are experiencing relational death – a rebellious child who threatens to run away, an angry parent who threatens to hurt you, a spouse who is having an affair. Marriage did not start this way. You married in the sight of God and witnesses. Now where is God? Why does He not see your despair and hear your cries? Did He take off and hide His eyes after you said your vows? No doubt

some of you have loved ones who are caught in the grip of disease. You prayed for healing. You tried to trust God, but it did not work. Your friend is still bed-ridden or died of cancer. How can God claim to see and care when it seems obvious that He does not?

These are deep questions, and there is much to say about them. But psalm 107 addresses only one aspect of these powerful personal questions – that God responds to the cries of His people. Notice first that it does not say God automatically delivers anyone who suffers. This is about God’s rescue of *His* people. Now of course God also rescues all sorts of people. His goodness is so overflowing, sinners and unbelievers also experience God’s blessing. But this psalm is about the redeemed, the ones God has gathered from the east and the west. These are the people for whom God has special care, His covenant people. These are the people God bought and paid for. They are His own precious possession, His children, His bride. God cares about all people. Scripture says He even cares about the birds. But God cares with greater intensity for His own people. If you are not a member of God’s covenant, the first thing you need to do is come into God’s family and receive His promise of protection.

Second, God comes to the rescue when His people cry out to Him. A lot of Christians drift through life essentially ignoring God. They develop deeply ingrained habits of getting up, going to work, coming home, spending the evening with family or friends, and going to bed – all without giving any thought to God. Then when disaster strikes they do what they have always done – they ignore God. Or they utter some meaningless prayer without really knowing what they are doing. Then when they sit in the pastor’s study and he says, “Have you been praying about this?” they stare dumbfounded. They come to the pastor as the last step on the way to divorce court or the funeral home. Maybe they hope he will perform some magic trick to solve their problem. What they need to do is cry out to the real, living, hearing God who longs to hear their prayers and answer them.

But what about those who do cry out to the Lord, and He does not deliver them? What about the ones who do die, or still suffer? Am I saying that they need to cry harder – that they lack sufficient faith to be heard? No, emphatically no! God does not play games with us. He does not taunt us by demanding some elusive standard of faith. No, scripture says that God even responds to weak faith. But no doubt we see that some prayers are unanswered – at least as we understand the answer. Nevertheless God declares that He hears our cries and cares about us. If this is true, if God hears the cry of the desperate and answers them, then His answer must be different than we expect. In the grand scheme of things, in God’s cosmic love for all his people, life will sometimes turn in a direction we did not desire.

Ultimately you are faced with this choice. Do you believe God when He says He cares about you, or do you believe your own sense of the way things ought to be? God says He hears the cry of His people when they are desperate, and rescues them. Is God telling the truth? Or is God lying to you? If God is telling the truth, then even life’s greatest disappointments must come in response to God’s love for us. I know this is hard to accept. But you do claim to believe in God, don’t you? Or do you believe in some other god than this one who wrote psalm 107?

In Prison (10-16)

Bernard Madoff is going to prison. If justice is done, he will die there. I am sure his thousands of victims are deeply grateful that this financial predator will be locked up for good. Earlier we mentioned Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn who was imprisoned by Josef Stalin. Solzhenitsyn was innocent and eventually was released. But psalm 107 tells about those who are guilty. Furthermore, it is about the redeemed of the Lord, God’s people, who rebelled and were jailed for their crimes. Is this cause for rejoicing, or should we be disturbed that justice is interrupted?

Psalm 107 is not talking about people who get too many parking tickets. These are hardened criminals. They knew God's word, and rejected it. Whatever they did, it was pretty bad, for they were chained up and tortured. That was not enough, so God subjected them to hard labor until they were completely crushed. Only at death's door did they remember God and cry out for help.

Who comes to mind when you think of this? Truly bad people, I suppose, like Hitler and Stalin, Saddam Hussein and Kim Jong Il, the murderous ruler of North Korea. But you would be wrong to think of these people. This is about the redeemed of the Lord, God's people, those who know God's word. They could not rebel against God if they had not known Him. No, these are the worst people on earth – those who know God's love, yet reject it for a life of crime. These are those like Saul of Tarsus, who knew Jesus, and hated Him – those who rape the bride of Christ and murder the children of God.

This psalm does not say that such people will escape the punishment for their sins. God is ready to hear and forgive, but they still go to prison and pay for their atrocities. In fact, it is justice which brings them to the point of repentance. This is not a message of mercy triumphing over justice, but of mercy and justice working together for the salvation of God's elect. Here we see the mercy of justice cracking the hardened, and the justice of showing mercy to the repentant. In simple terms, no one is beyond redemption. No one is so evil he might never repent. God shows His loving faithfulness to His covenant people by rescuing them, even when they sin grievously.

The application here is never to give up on one of God's people, even when they commit terrible sins. Do not be surprised to find that there are murderers, adulterers, thieves, and pedophiles in the church. Do not hinder justice. Some of these people should be locked up for a long time. Prison may be the only place where God's mercy can be revealed to them. Visit those in prison, pray for them, and welcome them into your church and your homes when they repent. Chuck Colson is one of the most famous ex-cons. He went to prison for crimes he committed in the Nixon administration. Prison is where he found God's mercy, and he has spent the rest of his life bringing the gospel to prisoners. His life is a testimony to the covenant faithfulness of God.

In Personal Foolishness (17-22)

Some people have affliction come to them. Others are afflicted because they are criminals. Then there are the chronically foolish. You are 20 years old. You wasted your time in school and blew your opportunity for college. You have no skills because you are lazy, and you have no friends because you are a creep. You are miserable. Or you are 40. You have been a loser all your life. You cannot keep a job, you squander your income on stupid investments. You play the lottery, your wife and kids do not respect you, and your friends mock you. You feel like ending it all.

This passage speaks of those who loathe any kind of food. A certain type of foolishness is at the root of anorexia and bulimia, but foolishness expresses itself in many other ways. What we call addictive behaviors are foolish – drunkenness, gambling, promiscuity, gluttony, painkillers – this is just the beginning of a list of behaviors which are foolish. This might sound harsh, but I do not mean to be. I know that those who are caught in the grip of addictions face a terrible struggle to get free. No one wakes up in the morning and says to himself, “I am going to ruin my life today by blowing all my money at the casino.” Addictions exert a powerful pull on people. You more likely wake up and say, “I was really foolish to waste my time yesterday on pornography. Today I will not do that.” But you do. So I understand, and God understands that you feel trapped in a life you hate. But that does not make it any less foolish, and we help no one by pretending otherwise.

Please, I do not wish to trivialize a difficult and complex problem. Today I will only address the aspect of foolishness that psalm 107 addresses. There is more to say, but this is the starting point. Again, deliverance comes when people cry to Yahweh, their own personal God, the God who loves them, the God who is always faithful to his covenant. You might think that this is obviously what anyone would do, but it is not. Instead we rely on ourselves. When faced with failure or disappointment, instead of turning completely to God, we resolve to do better next time. We might ask God for a bit of help, but our attitude is that He is assisting in a work that we are doing. But help is not what you need. Verse 20 tells us that you need healing. Not physical healing – spiritual healing; healing that can come only from God’s word.

Again you might say, “But I read the Bible, and it does not help.” Well let’s think about this. What are you if you are not a fool? Scripture calls you a wise man. Wisdom is not education, or knowledge, or intelligence. Wisdom is being full of God’s word. Proverbs paints a vivid picture of the wise man who seeks diligently for wisdom and treasures it above gold and gems. Wisdom is thinking the way God thinks and feeling the way God feels. Wisdom is taking pleasure in hard work and moderation. Foolishness is taking pleasure in entertainment and excess. Wisdom does not come by personal discipline. Strong discipline only displaces addiction into work – making you a workaholic. Wisdom comes by being immersed in God’s word.

If you are caught in addictive behavior, I urge you to see someone who can help you. But the first thing you need to know, and what needs to be a permanent part of your life is a headlong pursuit of God’s word. Nothing else will help without this. Listen to God speak to you in His word when you wake up, and at lunch, and after work, and at bedtime. Learn to think about the scripture while you work and at all other times. Scripture is the medicine which will heal you. Take it in large doses.

On the Sea (23-32)

You would think that after hurricane Katrina we might learn that man cannot control nature. But no, now we have the spectacle of Al Gore and company acting as though they can control the earth’s climate. Let me say immediately that we ought to be good stewards of the earth, and that includes prudent measures to conserve our resources and protect the environment. What is foolish is the hysterical rhetoric and religious fervor of the climate change movement.

Psalm 107 reminds us that God controls the weather, and that He does so for the sake of His people when they cry out to Him. Again, you may be surprised to learn that we generally do anything before calling out to God. Let’s start with you. When there was a drought several years ago, did you pray for rain? Did you pray for rain as often as you watered your lawn? As often as you *thought* about watering your lawn? I was interviewed by a pulpit committee years ago. It was a farming community, and one of their questions was if I would pray for rain. Of course I would pray for rain! But why did they even ask such a question? Because one of the candidates said he would not. As Dave Barry used to say, I am not making this up!

This psalm tells us of people caught in some terrible weather – a storm so awful, perhaps it was a hurricane. They never saw a storm like this, and they knew they were going to die. But God saw their terror, and He came to their rescue. I cannot explain why God allows deadly hurricanes to harass us. But I can tell you with all certainty that God controls the weather, and He hears our prayers when we cry for His mercy.

On the Land (33-38)

If you want to inflame public passions, announce that natural disasters are a result of sin. No doubt it is cruel to single out a specific class of sinners, such as homosexuals, as the cause of God’s wrath. The Puritans understood much more clearly that all of us commit sins worthy of God’s punishment. If we are going to say that a nation is suffering because of sin, let us include all sin in the cause. And this is exactly

what psalm 107 does. We are not talking about a period of drought here, but the destruction of a land. What do you think God was doing when a fertile land dries up and never again yields a good crop? Did Satan sneak in while God's back was turned and do this? Did climate change get out of God's control? Is God Lord of creation or not? As Lord of creation, He controls the land. And when a people devote themselves to sin, He destroys the productiveness of their land.

But God loves His creation, and He also blesses the earth with rain and sun and all that is necessary for it to be beautiful and fruitful. Man is the caretaker of the earth, but the richness of the farms on the plains, the abundance of the French vineyards, and the productivity of our forests is the result of God's blessing.

In Society (39-42)

This same principle applies to society. Most of the world has participatory government, which is a real blessing, but it can obscure the fact that men do not appoint leaders – God does. In a participatory government God works through the people and uses democratic processes, yet it is still God who raises up and pulls down leaders. So while we ought to participate as good citizens in our government, the most important responsibility of Christians is to pray for our leaders. And when we are faced with evil leaders, either at home or abroad, we must pray for God to bring them down. These are prayers that God will hear. At this time we should pray specifically for God to end the reign of Ahmadinejad in Iran, Kim Jong Il in Korea, and the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan. These are thoroughly evil regimes which must end.

The Steadfast Love of the Lord Endures Forever (43)

Over and over, in many different ways, God declares that His steadfast love endures forever. If this is true, we are called to praise and worship Him for this overwhelming love of the Creator and Lord of the universe. This is the testimony of God. God claims to love us, and aims to prove it in all these ways. Yet even so, many people still do not believe. There are those who still say, with all the brokenness and evil in the world, how can we know that God loves us? Does it not seem more like God is absent or does not care.

One day a baby was born, grew to manhood, preached the arrival of God's Kingdom, fed the hungry and healed the sick, and showed all the signs of deity. Jesus led a hard life, a life of hunger and thirst, weariness and frustration, sickness and death. Then He was betrayed by a friend, arrested on false charges, tried by a corrupt court, convicted of imaginary crimes, and killed in the most brutal way known to man. Jesus did all this to prove that He knows what you suffer, and He cares for you. Then Jesus rose from the dead with power over sin and death – a power He gives to you, if you believe in Him. That power comes to you today by this word I am preaching to you, and in the bread and wine you will receive in a few moments. God loves you with an eternal love, and the proof is in the broken bread and spilled wine. As you eat this bread and drink this wine, Jesus enters your life and shares your suffering more deeply than anyone on earth. His Spirit gives you the resurrection power to triumph over any trials you may face. And as this sacrament is appointed until Jesus returns, so the steadfast love of the Lord endures forever.

Prayer

Sovereign Lord, we worship you as the Creator and Ruler of all the earth. We adore you as our Father, and Brother, and Lover. We praise you as our Savior and Lord. Father, we come to you today with weak faith, and some may come with no faith at all. We cry out to you knowing that our cries are too feeble to do any good. We know there is no hope in ourselves, so we come, however weakly, to you – asking you to hear us. Do not look on our faithfulness, but on the faithfulness of the Lord Jesus – and for His sake grant our prayers. Remember your promises. Remember your covenant with us. Rescue us from all our troubles, and bring us into your eternal Kingdom. Through Your Son Jesus Christ, our Lord, we pray. Amen.

C. David Green
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