

Long Live the King

Psalm 61

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This morning, we come to Psalm 61. The title of the message is "Long Live the King." I would invite you—would you stand with me now for the reading of God's word?

Hear my cry, O God, listen to my prayer; from the end of the earth I call to you when my heart is faint. Lead me to the rock that is higher than I, for you have been my refuge, a strong tower against the enemy.

Let me dwell in your tent forever! Let me take refuge under the shelter of your wings! Selah. For you, O God, have heard my vows; you have given me the heritage of those who fear your name.

Prolong the life of the king; may his years endure to all generations! May he be enthroned forever before God; appoint steadfast love and faithfulness to watch over him!

So will I ever sing praises to your name, as I perform my vows day after day.
[ESV]

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Would you pray with me?

Lord, we thank you for your word that is not dead but that is living and active, sharper than any double-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, joints and marrow, discerning the thoughts and the intentions of the heart. And, O God, we are all in this place naked and exposed to your eyes, the one to whom we must all give account. And that is good news, Lord, because that means you know precisely what we stand in need of this morning. And so would you take these efforts of mine, weak and unworthy though they may be, and use them to bless your people? Meet us where we are, and give us what we need, faith, hope, joy, correction, conviction, peace, whatever it may be that we would be people who live for the glory, honor, and fame of Jesus Christ. And we ask it in His name. Amen. Amen and amen.

Please be seated. Back in 2006, the movie *Superman Returns* came out, and it is, in my opinion, the best of all of the Superman movies. Some may disagree with me, but I've seen them all, from the Christopher Reeves version all the way up to *Man of Steel*, which is pretty good. And I think *Superman Returns* is better than all of them.

In this movie, Superman has disappeared from the scene for five years. He's left Lois Lane and all of the earth to search for his proper place in the universe. And Lois, for her part attempting to heal from the disappointment of Superman's leaving, writes an essay for which she wins a Pulitzer Prize. The essay's title is, "Why the World Doesn't Need Superman." And, of course, Superman returns, because that's the title of the movie. And he ends up spending some time with Lois Lane. And when they get the opportunity to talk, Lois quotes to him from her essay and says, "The world doesn't need a savior," and then for good measure, she adds, "And neither do I." And then he takes her on a ride as only Superman can, high in the sky and above the clouds. And they're looking down over the earth. And he asks her this question. "What do you hear?" And she says, "I don't hear anything." And then he responds to her by saying, "I hear everything." And you get a glimpse into what it's like to have Superman's hearing. You

hear the sounds of sirens and screams and violence. And then he says what I think are the most powerful words in the movie. He says, "You wrote that the world doesn't need a savior, but everyday I hear people crying out for one." And I don't know if the script writer knew how profound he was in that line.

But every human heart in some way or another is crying out for a savior. And this is so often the case because there is so much that is lamentable in this world. There is so much cause for lamentation. And that's why I love this psalm that we are looking at. Stress and distress and grief and sorrow and feeling overwhelmed are woven into the fabric of our lives. You cannot live in this world and not experience these things. And they bring with them a sense of desperation. The question is how will we respond to the desperate times?

And I plucked the sermon title, "Long Live the King," from David's words in verse 6 of the psalm. This title is meant to be a declaration of praise from us to God for the eternal king Jesus Christ. As this psalm moves from distress to praise, we can find ourselves taking that same journey because Jesus Christ has taken it for us. We're to look at this psalm under these three headings. The song of lament, singing for shelter and security, and the song of praise.

The song of lament. The life situation under which this psalm is written can be found in the book of 2 Samuel chapters 13 through 20, and particularly 2 Samuel 17. And what we find in those chapters is that King David is on the run again. He had been on the run before when the prophet Samuel had anointed him as king, and King Saul was trying to kill him. But now he's fleeing for his life from his own son Absalom. God had delivered him from the hand of Saul and had established his throne. And at the high point of his kingdom, God had made a covenant promise with David that he would always have a son on the throne. And he must be wondering, "Surely, the Lord did not mean for it to take place like this. Here I am in exile while my son sits on the throne and is trying to kill me." He is far away from his home and the place of security. He says he's at the end of the earth. He is under duress, and the situation seems unbearable. He says that his heart is faint. And this is a vivid picture of his suffering, displace, and lacking control over the situation, lacking the ability to alter his circumstances. He is suffering, if you will, a double whammy. He is both displaced and helpless.

And this is what's so awful about suffering. Whether we are physically removed from our place of security or we only mentally and emotionally are dislodged from the place of peace, we suffer pain, and we become frightfully aware of the fact that we lack control. And this makes our hearts faint. This brings grief upon us.

I remember just a few years ago when I read Nicholas Wolterstorff's book *A Lament for a Son* that was written over 30 years ago. But the book is timeless. He published the lamentations that he wrote after the tragic death of his 25-year-old son Eric. He wrote among other things,

"I did not grieve as one who has no hope. Yet, Eric is gone. Here and now, he's gone. Now I cannot talk with him. Now I cannot hug him. Now I cannot hear of his plans for the future. That is my sorrow. A friend said, 'Remember he's in good hands.' I was deeply moved, but that reality does not put Eric back in my hands now. That's my grief. For that grief, what consolation can there be other than having him back?"

And when I read those words, my heart and my own mind began to think of the pain that I experienced in my life in loss. I began to think and remember particularly of the searing loss that I still feel every time I think about my father, who passed away over 12 years ago. I remember seeing his lifeless body laying there on that hospital bed, and crying out to God saying, "O God, I want there to be breath in his body. I want him to breathe again." And I began to cry, even as I'm almost doing now. I wanted to close his book

and stop reading because the words were hurting me.

But that's the point. We share in the experience of suffering. I want us to realize that David is inviting us into that shared experience of human suffering because everything is messed up. The world is not the way it ought to be. Don't just gloss over his words here, poetic and brief as they are.

A few years back when I was still pastoring here in Columbia, we hosted a conference in Baltimore, Faith Christian Fellowship. And one of our speakers was Dr. Diane Langberg, and she spoke to us on the journey of grief. David is grieving here in this psalm, and grief is an intense emotional suffering that's caused by loss or misfortune or injury or evil of any kind. And Dr. Langberg said to us, "Grief oppresses." She said, "It presses down on our life." And the question becomes, she says, "How can you trust the one who could have prevented your grief?" See, here's the one thing you know when you're in the middle of it. The one thing you don't know, rather. You don't know how long it's going to last. You have no answer to the question why, and you have no answer to the question how long.

But incredibly, in the middle of the grief and the suffering, David cries out to the very one who could have prevented it. "Hear my cry, O God. Pay attention to my prayer." Is he naïve? No, he's not. In his lamenting that he is at the end of the earth and his heart is faint is the awareness that he needs God. He needs God to do what he cannot do. He prays, "Lead me to the rock that is higher than I." The rock is a place of refuge. The rock is a place of safety. It is a place of protection. But it is impossible for him to get there on his own. What he leans on is the fact that he has experienced God's protection and deliverance in the past. He says, "You have been my refuge, a strong tower against the enemy." I don't feel so protected right now, Lord. I'm suffering, and I don't know what the outcome of this is going to be. But I do know you."

I'm not trying to be flippant and make it seem as though this is easy. What I am not trying to do is make it appear as though the journey out of distress and grief is some kind of formula that we can dogmatically apply in our lives. It is not that simple. What I'm trying to highlight really is the need for lamentation in the suffering. Because suffering is real, because grief is real, lamentation is necessary.

You see, it doesn't matter how much money we have. It doesn't matter how many degrees we have. It doesn't matter what efforts we make to try to insulate ourselves and our lives and our loved ones from the undesirable things that lead to lamentation. That effort is actually fruitless. Let me tell you, we all will experience suffering and grief and loss. I mean, David was, after all, the king. If that was enough, right? If that was enough, he wouldn't be lamenting and grieving.

See, family, if lament is never a part of the songs you sing, then something is wrong. Lamenting is not the end of the song, but it's there. Grief and lamentation are actually signs of life. And when we are in that place of lament, sometimes the fact that our king has sung this song already is our only lifeline. Knowing that our king is a refuge, knowing that He is a strong tower, having had evidence of it in the past is a lifeline in suffering and in grief. Don't avoid singing the song of lamentation. You see, the way of faith in the Lord is not toughing it out. These words of David and so many other psalms, they give us freedom to lament and to bring that lament before God. Song of lament.

Singing for shelter and security, this is what David is praying for. He's praying for shelter and security when he sings and says, "Lead me to the rock that is higher than I, for you have been my refuge, a strong tower against the enemy." Shelter and security is what he's praying for when he says, "Let me dwell in your tent forever. Let me take refuge in the shelter of your wings." What we find out is that David is not simply praying here just for physical shelter and security. It is not simply, "Lord, get me out of this bad situation. Deliver me from these undesirable circumstances and conditions." It is a prayer actually also for spiritual shelter and security.

See, to be at the end of the earth, to be far from home for him was to be not only far from Jerusalem but far from the Tabernacle. That's the tent that he says he wants to dwell in forever. It's the central place of Israel's worship. He remembers the Tabernacle. This is clearly poetic and metaphoric language. He doesn't want to set up his bed in the Tabernacle, right? Yes, he wants to be physically near the Tabernacle, but he wants to live securely in God's presence. He wants to know that he is forever safe and secure in the presence of God. As one writer puts it,

"To take refuge under the shelter of God's wings may be a reference David is making to the Ark of the Covenant that was in the most holy place in the Tabernacle, where the wings of the cherubim were spread upward and overshadowed the top of the Ark. But David isn't singing about the wings of angels. He's talking about the wings of God."

There is a request. There is a request here for spiritual protection and safety regardless of the location and situation.

You know, David loves to picture the sight of mother birds protecting their young and giving them shelter and security from the elements and covering them with her wings. And he loves to use that imagery for the kind of security that he desires from God. He says in Psalm 17:8, "Keep me as the apple of your eye. Hide me in the shadow of your wings." And Psalm 36:7, "How precious is your steadfast love, O Lord, the children of mankind take refuge in the shadow of your wings." Psalm 57:1, "Be merciful to me, O God. Be merciful to me, for in you my soul takes refuge. In the shadow of your wings, I take refuge till the storms of destruction pass by." Psalm 63:7, "You have been my help, and in the shadow of your wings, I will sing for joy." Even our Lord Jesus Christ uses this imagery of Himself in the gospels in Luke 13:34 where he says, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it. How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, but you were not willing."

The distress and the disorientation that comes from loss, whatever that loss may be, whether it's physical death or something else that causes the loss, it can make us feel separated from God. The feeling of having been abandoned by God can be palpable. Right? If you are a Christian, you know this is not true, right? That you can never be separated from God. Right? We know the promise that God makes, that Jesus makes. "I will never leave you nor forsake you." It's God's promise to His people. But that doesn't necessarily mean we'll always feel that way.

David is praying for intimacy with God. "Let me dwell in your tent forever! Let me take refuge under the shelter of your wings!" Let me grow closer and closer to you, O God. Let me know your presence. What the word of God makes abundantly clear is that knowing God is not simply a matter of giving mental assent to some theological doctrinal propositions about Him. The people of God want intimacy with God. The Christian life is a life of intimacy with God. We desire it. We are desperate for it. We know when we don't feel it, and it grieves us not to feel that sense of intimacy.

Do you hunger for the presence and the assurance of God Himself? You might know the promise of His presence, but do you hunger for it? He satisfies the longing soul and the hungering soul that models as He fills with good things. You see, sometimes what distress does is make us hungry.

And lastly, the song of praise. There's likely a change in David's situation between verses 4 and 5 in the psalm. We have that musical liturgical term here at the end of verse 4, "Selah," and this helps to divide the psalm. But more than that, we hear David saying in verse 5, "For you, O God, have heard my vows; you have given me the heritage of those who fear your name." Commentator Eric Lane remarks in his commentary about this verse, "In verse 1, he asks God to hear and listen. Now he knows God has done

so. So he laid hold of the promise God has given him." That is "the heritage of those who fear your name," meaning the land and people God had entrusted to David in His covenant with him in 2 Samuel 7. God had heard his prayer. The Lord had responded to his vow.

And David returns to Jerusalem, and he's reestablished as the king. And so a shift is taking place. The lamentation is transitioning to a song of praise. The distress and the suffering, the feeling of abandonment and the desire for safety and security are now the song of praise.

Listen to what he says in verses 6 to 8. He says, "Prolong the life of the king; may his years endure to all generations! May he be enthroned forever before God; appoint steadfast love and faithfulness to watch over him! So will I ever sing praises to your name, as I perform my vows day after day." He is praying for himself and for the generation to follow him. He has in a way received a new lease on life. God has spared him. And so he prays for the continuation of his dynasty. "Lord, prolong my reign for generations." David is praying this. "Keep my lineage from enduring the abandonment that I have known. Enthroned them forever before you, O God. Guard them with steadfast love and faithfulness."

Did David know the implications of what he was praying here? I don't know if he did, but the Holy Spirit did. He put these words in David's mouth knowing that there would indeed be a king from the lineage of David who would live forever before God. There would indeed become a king whose years would endure through all generations who would be guarded by the steadfast love and faithfulness of God Himself. That king you know who lives forever is none other than the Lord Jesus Christ. He is the one who has endured the crucible of being abandoned by God like nobody else ever had or could endure, and yet now He sits enthroned forever at the right hand of the Majesty on High. And His people don't have to pray, "May the king live forever." We just pray, "Long live the king."

A few years ago, late night talk show host and comedian Stephen Colbert opened up about the tragedy that sent his life into a rebellious and aimless direction at ten-years old. His father and his two older brothers were killed in a plane crash. And in a 2019 interview, CNN's Anderson Cooper asked him about it. And this is how it went.

Anderson Cooper says to Stephen Colbert, "You told an interviewer that you have learned to, 'love the things that I mostly wish had not happened.' You went on to say, 'What punishments of God are not gifts?'" Anderson said, "Do you really believe that?"

And Colbert said,

"Yes. It is a gift to exist, and with existence comes suffering. There is no escaping that. It doesn't mean that I want it to have happened. I want it to not have happened. But if you're grateful for your life, which is a positive thing to do, then you have to be grateful for all of it. You can't pick and choose what you're grateful for. So what do you get from loss? You get awareness of other people's loss, which allows you to connect with that other person, which allows you to love more deeply, which allows you to understand what it means to be a human being if all people suffer. What's the point of being here if you can't be the most human that you can be? And that means acknowledging and ultimately being grateful for the things I wished did not happen because they gave me a gift."

Then Anderson Cooper in agreement says, "This is part of being alive, the sadness, the suffering. You can't have happiness without having loss and suffering." And Colbert says this. "And in my tradition, that's the great gift of the sacrifice of Christ, that God does it, too. You are really not alone because God did it, too."

Because Jesus Christ sits enthroned as our savior who intimately knows our suffering and our grief and our lament, He is our rock. He is the rock of ages we sang about cleft for us. He is the tent in whom we will dwell forever. He is our refuge, our shelter in the time of storm. It is under His wings that we find security and safety.

No one sings a song of praise to God like him. And so he leads us through this song of praise through lamentation and distress. It's like the pastor says to the Hebrews in Hebrews 2:10-12,

For it was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the founder of their salvation perfect through suffering. For he who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one source. That is why he is not ashamed to call them brothers, saying,

"I will tell of your name to my brothers; in the midst of the congregation I will sing your praise." [ESV]

Listen. Sometimes we need to feel that we are at the end of the earth before we can discover how wonderful Jesus is. Make no mistake about it. Lamentation is necessary because suffering is real. And sometimes, we do need to feel like we are at the end, like we are in desperation before we can really know how wonderful Jesus is.

Superman was right. The world does cry out for a savior. And God has provided one in Jesus Christ. Through faith in Him, we know that God hears our cry and that He attends to our prayer, that He provides us the shelter and the security of His presence through every distress. And so the final song in the life of the Christian is not the song of lament. The final song in the life of the Christian is a song of praise to God. Let's pray.

Thank you, Lord. We say Lord, long live the king. We thank you, Lord Jesus, that you are our king who sits enthroned at the right hand of the majesty on high, that you ever live to make intercession for your people. And so we pray, Lord God, that you would be pleased to meet us every time we go through the distress and the grief that suffering brings our way, that we would be people who know that you hear our cry, that you always respond with your word of comfort and presence to the petitions of your people. We bless you. In Jesus's name. Amen.