

A CLIFFHANGING PRAYER FOR DELIVERANCE

Psalm 55: 1-23 – Pastor Richard P. Carlson

Meditating on Psalm 55 has brought home to my soul and spirit the cliffhanging experience of David when he ran for his life from his own son Absalom after David was betrayed by his most trusted counselor, Ahithopel. Two cliffhanging pictures are on my mind this morning as I come to deliver this message. The first picture came to me this past Thursday as I looked at some cliffhanger pictures posted by a writer, Paul Thompson on September 26, 2011. The pictures were captured by a wildlife photographer, Jean-Francois Largot. The dramatic cliffhanging saga was filmed and played out in Kenya's Masai game reserve. A male lion cub was caught on film as he cried out pitifully for help. Apparently feeding on a carcass, a portion of the cliff edge fell beneath him and he fell down 15-20 feet where he was clinging for dear life to the side of a vertical cliff. His mother arrived at the edge of the precipice with three other lionesses and a male lion. The three lionesses started to clamber down the cliff together, but they turned back, daunted by the sheer drop. Eventually one single factor determined which of the four lionesses would risk her life to save the youngster – it was the mother lioness who would try. The drama began. Slowly, agonizingly, the big cat edged her way down towards her terrified cub, using her powerful claws to grip the crumbling cliff side. One slip from her and both animals would end up dead at the bottom of the ravine. Just as the exhausted cub seemed about to fall, his mother circled beneath him and snatched him up in her jaws. She then began the equally perilous journey back up to the top of the cliff. Moments later, the mother lioness and her cub arrived, and the mother gave her frightened cub a consoling lick on his head to let him know all was well.

The second cliffhanging picture first came to my mind as I read Psalm 55. This picture on my mind hung in my bedroom as I grew up. The artist of the oil painting was Alford Usher Soord. If you noticed the front of our bulletin today, there is the awesome haunting portrait of Jesus rescuing a lost sheep like you and like me. Alford Usher Soord was born in 1868 and died at age 47. Soord was a British painter whose most famous work is this painting of The Parable Of The Lost Sheep, depicting a sheep stranded halfway down a steep cliff and the shepherd is hanging perilously over the edge, risking his own life to save it. Soord was born September 1, 1868, 145 years ago today, in Sunderland, England, but he was brought up in York, along with his siblings Helen and George. Soord's parents were Thomas Soord, Jr. and Jane Latha Soord. His father was a corn merchant. Soord's most famous picture "The Lost Sheep" was exhibited in 1898 in the Royal Academy. By 1916, over 300,000 reproductions of it had been sold in England and

America. This painting continues to sell itself to thousands more than a century after its being painted.

In our cliff-hanging difficulties of life, we can opt for two different paths of either reacting or responding to our crises. David considered reacting at first to his cliff-hanging trouble, but upon reflection and waiting on the Lord, he responded wisely to the crisis and he overcame it by the power of the Lord. Sorrow, danger, and terror had come upon David with the force of a hurricane. I call us to consider which path we choose when we come to the cliff-hanging experiences of our lives. What are these two paths, and which path are we taking even today as we cling in terror to the precarious perch we have on the cliff where we are crying out to the Lord? May God help us not to react, but to respond, not to flee or fly to escape, but to face it casting ourselves upon the Lord. Now let's look at the two paths.

IN CLIFF-HANGING DIFFICULTIES, OUR FIRST REACTION IS TO FLEE, TO FLY, AND TO TRY TO ESCAPE. (I.) Turn to our text in Psalm 55: 1-8 and notice especially verses 6-8."Give ear to my prayer, O God, and hide not yourself from my plea for mercy. Attend to me, and answer me; I am restless in my complaint and I moan, because of the noise of the enemy, because of the oppression of the wicked. For they drop trouble upon me, and in anger they bear a grudge against me. My heart is in anguish within me; the terrors of death have fallen upon me. Fear and trembling come upon me, and horror overwhelms me. And I say, "Oh, that I had wings like a dove! I would fly away and be at rest; yes, I would wander far away; I would lodge in the wilderness; Selah. I would hurry to find a shelter from the raging wind and tempest."

Let's break down this unwise and dangerous first reaction by looking at the segments that can lead to this dangerous first reaction to cliff-hanging difficulties. **Reacting and seeking to flee, fly, and to try to escape from the difficulty can wisely (1) begin in prayer.** I love the start of this psalm. Notice v. 1—"Give ear to my prayer, O God, and hide not yourself from my plea for mercy." David is in dead earnest, in deep affliction, and this is pleading for mercy and a cry that God would not turn away from his cliff-hanging difficulty. **This psalm begins in prayer, but it quickly (2) turns into complaint.** David cries, in verses 2, 3, "Attend to me, and answer me; I am restless in my complaint and I moan, because of the noise of the enemy, because of the oppression of the wicked. For they drop trouble upon me, and in anger they bear a grudge against me." Now be assured, there is no sin in complaining to God and moaning to Him." I Peter 5: 7 is clear, "Cast all your anxieties upon Him, because He cares for you." It isn't wrong to be disturbed and to tell God about it, and to be restless and distracted. The Hebrew word for "I am restless," is **ruwd.** It means to tramp about, to ramble around, to be

mournful or disconsolate. The enemies of David are wicked men and they were bringing huge pressure and distress upon David. Not only was he hanging by a thread of hope, but they were making trouble to fall upon David's head in huge dump truck loads as they were venting their anger. Nevertheless, though stomping around and crying to God in restlessness is not wrong, be aware, it can deteriorate if we aren't careful. **For David, the restless moaning, complaining and stomping around issued into (3) a broken anguished heart.** I read in verse 4, "My heart is in anguish within me; the terrors of death have fallen upon me." Now the sense of David's predicament is hitting him full force. He is clinging for dear life to a precarious cliff of hope. The horrors and terrors of death are becoming the focus of what he believes will happen in his inevitable future. David is trembling with fear, for his life, shuddering, and giving up hope when the conniving and betrayal of his counselor Ahithophel was revealed to him and when David knew his son Absalom had through the betrayal and counsel of Ahithophel captured the kingdom from him. The plot was now revealed to David and it broke like dozens of eggs upon his head. David was a mess, because he didn't want to have to go to war with his own son, to save the kingdom.

David's psalm 55 pictures him so upset that he is pacing, weeping, groaning, and making meaningless noises. The King James Version of Psalm 55: 2 says, "and make a noise." The ESV states, "and I moan." The Hebrew word for make a noise or moan is **huwm**. This word means to make an uproar, to agitate, to show vexation, to speak noisily and to put in commotion, to crush and break and disturb and trouble, apparently with words. David was in trouble. Had someone died? No! Had a family member been harmed? No! Was his nation facing disaster? Yes! And the disaster was from his own son and first of all, from his betraying counselor. Betrayal can be more damaging than violence. Ahithophel had chosen to betray David and team up with his son, Absalom. **Ahithophel's betrayal did something to David that Goliath couldn't do. (4) David became filled with fear.** I read, in verse 5, "Fear and trembling come upon me, and horror overwhelms me." David was the one the Israelites sang about, singing, "Saul has killed his thousands, and David his ten thousands." David killed a hundred Philistine men to pay the bride price or dowry for his wife. He never flinched in the face of Goliath. But now, the praying, moaning, complaining, and anguish issued in terrorizing, horror-filled fear. The degree to which his counselor's betrayal and contempt for David had been expressed, did something to David that none of us would ever expect, and it may have surprised David. It made David afraid. David was afraid for his life. **Although David had been in danger 100nds of times, this time the fear of death was so consuming that it led David (5) to cowardice, to flight, to fleeing, to try to escape death.** David desired something no soldier or warrior should ever want or have to admit. Notice verses 6-8. "And I say, "Oh, that I had wings like a

dove! I would fly away and be at rest; yes, I would wander far away; I would lodge in the wilderness; Selah. I would hurry to find a shelter from the raging wind and tempest.” David now wanted to have wings to fly from his cliff-hanging difficulties. He had no desire to try to conquer His enemy through the power of God. He was nearly ready to neglect his duty as king to save his own life, forgetting about the conspiracy of his son, Absalom and seeking to return his reign to Israel over the coup’ by Absalom.

David knew that God’s discipline was being fulfilled and his deep desire was (6) David to flee from his post and duty as king and to try to evade receiving the discipline of the Lord.

The discipline of the Lord was for a time to remove David from his kingdom through the conspiracy of Absalom with David’s trusted counselor, turned betrayer, Ahithophel. David wanted to fly away from the rod of God. Have we ever tried to avoid or to get out of God’s appointed discipline in our lives? Do you remember Nathan’s promise to David of delayed divine discipline coming in the future? Nathan prophesied to David, “Now therefore, the sword shall never depart from your house, because you have despised Me and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife. Thus says the Lord, “Behold, I will raise up evil against you out of your own house. And I will take your wives and give them to your neighbor (which was his own son, Absalom) and he shall lie with your wives in the sight of this sun. For you did it secretly, but I will do this thing before all Israel and before the sun.” Nathan the prophet prophesied this discipline to David before David confessed his own sin, saying, “I have sinned against the Lord.” David’s deep confession without alibis or justifying excuses is a model for us all. Didn’t that change God’s mind about disciplining him? No, discipline is best given and received following clean confession with no excuses. Nathan’s response to David after his confession was, “The Lord also has put away your sin; you shall not die. Nevertheless, because by this deed you have utterly scorned the Lord, the child who is born to you shall die.” Shouldn’t that have been enough discipline? When God has a plan of discipline, He will not be talked out of it. And neither can we run away, fly away or escape it or evade it. **We are not told that David wanted to commit suicide to evade his cliff-hanging difficulty, but that very escape plan was followed, a false path of escape in the life of Ahithophel, his trusted counselor who (7) took took his own life when Absalom failed to take his counsel.** We read in II Samuel 17: 23, “When Ahithophel saw that his counsel was not followed, he saddled his donkey and went off home to his own city. He set his house in order, and hanged himself, and he died and was buried in the tomb of his father.” Suicide is going from a bad cliff-hanging experience to a worse experience. When we die, we are still ourselves, and now we must stand before God to answer Him for taking away the precious life He gave us. Amos 5: 19 tells us our escape desire will take us from bad to worse. He says, “In that day you will

be like a man who runs from a lion—only to meet a bear. Escaping from the bear, he leans his hand against a wall in his house—and he is bitten by a snake.” **It is better to fight the battles in life, in the company and fellowship of God’s people than (8) to escape to loneliness in a wilderness as a solitary dove, v. 6-8 where the guilty heart turns to prey upon itself.** Beloved, give up all your futile reactions and desires to escape. There is a better way to face life’s cliff-hangers.

IN CLIFF-HANGING DIFFICULTIES, OUR BEST RESPONSE IS TO FACE THE DIFFICULTIES SEEKING THE HELP OF GOD. (II.) Verses 9-11 are slowly, but surely pointing to a better way and David took that way. What is this way? **(1) Ask God to fight your battles for you.** Notice v. 9-11. “Destroy, O Lord, divide their tongues; for I see violence and strife in the city. Day and night they go around it on its walls, and iniquity and trouble are within it; ruin is in its midst; oppression and fraud. Do not depart from its marketplace.” As David is penning this psalm, Jerusalem had fallen to Absalom, and David and a few of his stalwart soldiers and supporters had left the city with him. God answered David’s fervent plea and divided the tongue of Ahithophel, David’s trusted counselor by making Absalom long for a second opinion, as Absalom called for another counselor of David, Hushai to share. Ahithophel in II Sam. 17: 1, asked Absalom for 12,000 soldiers to pursue David and kill only him that night. It was great counsel, but God aimed to defeat the plan by having Absalom seek a second opinion. Hushai told Absalom that David was a mighty man and leaving Jerusalem was for David like robbing a bear of her cubs. Wait till tomorrow and go to battle in person with all Israel joining you from Dan to Beersheba. God divided the tongues and Absalom became a dart board for Joab as he was found with his long hair entangled and hanging from an oak tree.

Tell God (2) about those who are betraying you and leave their judgment to Him. Notice verses 12-15. “For it is not an enemy who taunts me—then I could bear it; it is not an adversary who deals insolently with me—then I could hide from him. But it is you, a man, my equal, my companion, my familiar friend. We used to take sweet counsel together; within God’s house we walked in the throng. Let death steal over them; let them go down to Sheol alive; for evil is in their dwelling place and in their heart. **Call on God (3) to save you, because you reverence Him.** Notice verses 16-19. “But I call to God, and the LORD will save me. Evening and morning and at noon I utter my complaint and moan, and he hears my voice. He redeems my soul in safety from the battle that I wage, for many are arrayed against me. God will give ear and humble them, he who is enthroned from of old, Selah because they do not change and do not fear God.” It is a sad commentary on many unbelievers that they do not change because they do not fear God. But David, for all his foibles and sins, loved and served and honored God. He knew only one

shepherd could reach over the cliff to save him from the certain death he was facing. **Remind God (4) that you will speak truth and that you are unwilling to violate your covenant with Him or with your brothers and sisters in the Lord.** I read in verses 20, 21, “My companion stretched out his hand against his friends; he violated his covenant. His speech was smooth as butter, yet war was in his heart; his words were softer than oil, yet they were drawn swords.” David is crying out to God about his being betrayed. Betrayal may be the worst feeling a human can endure. Trust is a wonderful but such a dangerous thing. Betrayal leaves us naked, exposed, vulnerable, utterly unhinged and disoriented, ripped to shreds. There’s nothing left to bank on, nothing to know for sure but that there seems to be a hole in your soul. What can we do then?

Cast your burden (5) on the Lord. Notice v. 22. David begins now as he closes his psalm to exhort us all, saying, “Cast your burden on the Lord, and He will sustain you; He will never permit the righteous to be moved.” David is not saying God’s people will never be martyred or killed. The Hebrew word for moved is **mowt**. Mowt means to waver or slip or shake or slide or fall. This is not a picture of no physical persecution ahead, but it is God’s promise to those who cast their burden on Him, that He will give them the strength to stand, even in the face of death. What an inspiration this is to a stronger faith, to a fuller courage, to a deeper inner strength, and to an anticipated victory. **Finally, (6) trust in God to deliver you from your cliff hanging difficulty, in spite of the ongoing treachery.** Verse 23 concludes the psalm saying, “But you, O God, will cast them down into the pit of destruction; men of blood and treachery shall not live out half their days. But I will trust in you.” Trust in God and sing. Victor Hugo, author of Les Miserables, once said, "Music expresses that which cannot be put into words and that which cannot remain silent." Psalm 55 is cliff-hanging prayer for deliverance that had to become a song. And song goes like this: “Sing when the day is bright, sing in the darkest night, every day, all the way, I will sing, sing, sing.” This psalm David gave to his choirmaster to lead all Israel in singing, with the help of stringed instruments, notice the title of the psalm. So beloved, sing to God with a new verse to the song. Sing when you want to flee, hanging precariously, face the foe, for you know, God has saved your soul.” Let’s bow and prepare our hearts for the Lord’s Supper.