

Psalm 61 The Rock that is Higher Than I
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Introduction

Last night we celebrated (if celebrate is the best word) Halloween. Halloween of course is associated with scary things. Children dress up in costumes, many of which are scary, and they knock on people's doors.

This year, we had a big problem: With Covid, going "trick-or-treating" was complicated. But that's not the biggest problem. Here's the biggest problem: This year, there are much more scary things going on than anything we would normally think of for Halloween.



Think about the kid who dresses up as a vampire. That's not scary, really. Are you scared of little kids in vampire outfits - even if they put big plastic teeth in their mouths? I might tell little kids that they look scary to make them happy, but in reality, no one is scared.

Here's scary: The headlines from last week's newspapers. Here's the headline from the Wall Street journal on Wednesday, October 28th:

"Mounting Unpaid Rent Risks U.S. Tidal Wave of Evictions".

When the Covid crisis started, we had to shut down our economy. That means people couldn't work, and many couldn't pay their rent. So, the government put a hold on evictions. However, they can't do that forever. At some point people will have to pay up. And guess what? They're still responsible for the rent that hasn't been paid. Some are afraid that we're going to see a massive meltdown in the economy because of that.

That's scary.

But maybe there's hope? Maybe the crisis will be over soon? Here's the headline in the same newspaper for Thursday, October 29, 2020, the next day:

"Lockdowns Ordered Again Across Europe"

So, the Europeans are worried about a "second wave".

That's scary.

Now, many people are retired. They don't have to worry about employment. They rely on pensions and retirement funds. The next headline for that day reads:

"Stocks Fall as Fears over Economy grow."

Pensions and retirement funds are based on stocks.

So, that's scary, too.

What do most people do when they're confronted with scary news? They get scared. And that's understandable. What do God's people do when they're confronted with scary news? Let's state that in a more realistic way: What do God's people do when they're faced with terrible threats? Let's look at God's word and find out. We're going to think about a Psalm that answers this question. It's Psalm 61.

- 1 Hear my cry, O God;
listen to my prayer.
- 2 From the ends of the earth I call to you,
I call as my heart grows faint;
lead me to the rock that is higher than I.
- 3 For you have been my refuge,
a strong tower against the foe.
- 4 I long to dwell in your tent forever
and take refuge in the shelter of your wings.
- 5 For you, God, have heard my vows;
you have given me the heritage of those who fear your name.
- 6 Increase the days of the king's life,
his years for many generations.
- 7 May he be enthroned in God's presence forever;
appoint your love and faithfulness to protect him.
- 8 Then I will ever sing in praise of your name
and fulfill my vows day after day.

(Psalm 61 NIV)

Let's ask again: What do God's People do when faced with terrible threats?

I. The Godly Cry Out to God.

Hear my cry, O God; listen to my prayer. (v 1)

When faced with a terrible threat, God's people cry out to God. Listen to this: "Hear my cry, O God." This isn't "Hey God, let's find a quiet place and have a little chat." This isn't dry. This is not intellectual. This is a **cry**. This come from the heart of a person in deep distress. The pain inside of them is forcing its way out of their mouth. And notice, it's not just a cry. Many people call out when they're feeling pain. If someone stubs their toe, what do you hear?

This person, though, has something special - This person has a relationship with God. So, when the pain in their soul erupts forth, it's not just sent out in a random wave. It's not just a scream of pain. It's certainly not a curse. ***It's pointed and focused to God.*** "Hear my cry, O God; listen to my prayer."

Do you sometimes feel like you're facing something terrible? Are you facing a threat? You have something in common with this person.

Why is this person suffering? Let's read on.

From the ends of the earth I call to you, (v 2)

To be a Psalm writer, you had to live in ancient Israel. That's not the end of the earth by anyone's book. So, what's the writer saying?

The famous English preacher Charles Haddon Spurgeon suggested that this Psalm was written by King David. After the day he became king, David was one of the most loved and successful kings of ancient Israel. There was only one exception. At one point, his son Absalom fomented a revolt. Absalom wanted to steal the kingdom from his father. Because David loved his son, he didn't react to early warnings that this was happening. David learned too late that his son had successfully amassed an army capable of taking Jerusalem, the capitol. David was forced to flee.

Imagine this: One day, he's living in a beautiful palace. The next, he's on foot running for his life. That sounds like a serious threat.

David could go no further than the borders of Israel, because any neighboring king might capture him and kill him. So, from his perspective, he's as far away from his home as he can get. For him, things couldn't be more desperate. So, with a note of poetry he says, "From the ends of the earth I cry out to you."

Have you ever faced a situation where you're at the end of your rope? It feels like things couldn't get worse. Have you ever found yourself in a place that feels like you could get no

further away from where you want to be? If you ever felt that way, David had something in common with you.

Let's understand something: David was a man of God. Many have considered him to be an example of what a King should be, and what a man should be. He spent almost his whole life serving God with great faith. When David was a teenager, he stood boldly before Goliath. Goliath was a giant. Goliath had a massive sword and the armor of a tank. David had a slingshot and three small stones. With all that, David took down the giant through the power of God.

It's now decades later. What was he feeling like when he called out to God?

"I call as my heart grows faint;" (v 2(b))

David's heart was growing faint. He was weak. He didn't have much strength left.

One thing I appreciate about the book of Psalms is how honest it is. This is very human. We're normally told that faithful people immediately trust in God. We're told "that's all you have to do – you just trust." Faithful people, we're told, don't wait until they're desperate. Well, sometimes even faithful people grow weak.

Have you ever faced a threat and waited a little too long to ask for help? You and David have something in common.

So, did David cry out just because he wanted to share his feelings? No. He asked for something. Let's find out what he asked for.

II. The Godly Ask for God's Protection

Here's what David prayed for:

...lead me to the rock that is higher than I.
For you have been my refuge,
a strong tower against the foe.
(v 2(b)-3)

When David faced a terrible threat, he cried out. But he didn't just scream wildly. He remembered that God was able to protect him.

David was a military man. In those days, one way to win a battle was to be higher than your enemy. You wanted to take the high ground. In those days, if you were high up and your enemy was down below you, you only had to throw a few big rocks to send the bad guys packing.

But that wasn't what David was talking about. He wasn't just interested in a small military advantage. He's acknowledging that he is insufficient for the threat that he's facing. He needed help. He needs something or someone bigger than he - Much bigger. He knew that he would not find it on this earth.

He knows that God is the one who is much, much bigger than he. He knows that because he called on God in the past for help. And God came through. God was David's refuge in the past. God was like a fortress to David, like a strong tower.

Are you facing a threat, and you feel absolutely overwhelmed? You and David have something in common. David found something bigger than himself. You can, too.

There's more.

III. The Godly Look to the Big Picture

We've looked at the first half of this in detail. Let's move quickly and look at the second half with a "big picture" perspective. We'll find that the Godly look for the big picture.

4 I long to dwell in your tent forever
and take refuge in the shelter of your wings. (v 4)

David wants this to be permanent. "I long to dwell in your tent forever"

In the military today, soldiers talk about a "foxhole conversion". Imagine you've got any normal person. They're a farmer, a factory worker, an office worker. They enlist in the military. They train for battle, but they're never really in danger. Then comes the day of battle. Then comes the first-time soldiers hear explosions around them. They realize their life is truly in danger. At that time, it's easy to make all kinds of promises and commitments to God. Sadly, a lot of those promises evaporate when safety comes.

David wants to live with God *forever*. He wants to learn to find his refuge in God on a long-term basis.

Next, David is going to take a moment to request some things that sound at first like they're about him, but they're really about the long-term good of Israel and God's purposes on the earth.

For you, God, have heard my vows;
you have given me the heritage of those who fear your name.
(v 5)

David promised God a long time ago that he wanted to serve him and serve God's people Israel.

Because of his commitment, God made him ruler over a great kingdom. He made that vow, and he want the opportunity to live it out. He wanted to be included among all those who have called on God's name in faith.

Increase the days of the king's life,
his years for many generations.
May he be enthroned in God's presence forever;
appoint your love and faithfulness to protect him.
(v 6-7)

Does any mortal man live for generations? Does a mortal man sit enthroned in God's presence forever? No. David wrote many Psalms. It's not unusual for David to start with things around him. But then, he enters into a state where he sees a bigger, eternal picture.

God promised David that one of his children would sit on the throne forever. Right now, that was in danger. Absalom was one of David's sons, but not the right one. **Solomon** needed to be on the throne in order to establish the line of David that would someday lead to the Messiah. So David was praying for his own life, but he was also praying for God's eternal plan. In order for that plan to happen, David had to complete his part.

That leads to our last point. And note: This is the most important part.

IV. They Look for God's Calling

Then I will ever sing in praise of your name
and fulfill my vows day after day. (v 8)

This has two parts. The first is praise. Praise is an awesome privilege. The Scriptures are full of places where people face tough situations. They ask God for help. It's not unusual to hear that God rescued people from those tough situations. That is truly wonderful. When that happens, it's a time for rejoicing. It's a time for praise. It's a time for singing.

We all like praise. We all like to sing happy songs. We all like to feel good. For many, the story stops there - And that's not a bad thing. Hearing stories of praise is good.

For some though, the story goes on. As wonderful as it is to hear that someone has been rescued, there can be something more. Listen to what David says:

"Then I will ever sing in praise of your name **and fulfill my vows day after day.**"

So, David isn't just saying, "rescue me". He's not saying, "rescue me so that I can live a happy life." **He's saying, "rescue me so that I can serve you and others."**

Let's pull this all together.

Conclusion

What do God's people do when face with a terrible threat? They cry out to God. If you find yourself faced with a terrible threat, you can cry out to God. You can cry out, "Lead me to the rock that is higher than I." God often rescues people who cry out to him. When he does, it's a wonderful thing. It's a time to sing praises. If you're facing a terrible threat, I hope you'll ask God to help.

We started by saying that last night was Halloween. As we said, it's full of scary things. Because it's full of scary things, many are surprised to find out that it's actually a Christian holiday. "Halloween" comes from the phrase, "All Hallows Eve" It's the evening before "All Hallows Day", or "All Saints Day". "All Saints Day" is a Christian holiday that commemorates martyrs of the Church - People who died for their faith. At one time, it took place in another month. No one knows exactly why, but centuries ago, it was moved to the end of October. Why did they do that?

There is no official reason, but based on my understanding of how Christians work, I have a guess.

Before the first millennium, when Christian missionaries first started traveling from southern Europe into northern Europe, they met people who were very superstitious. Especially in the Fall. In the Summertime, things are great. There's lots of food. There's lots of life. Then there's a harvest. There are festivals and celebrations.

But then, sometime in late October, things start to grow cold. The nights get longer. You can only hope that you have enough food stored up to make it through the winter. If you don't have enough wood to burn, you may freeze to death. Because it's cold, you're more likely to get sick. Back in those days, people didn't understand germs and viruses. They just knew that people died for mysterious reasons. So, they got scared.

Fancy that! The ancient people of the world were scared by death and disease and running out of the things they needed to live.

How did the Christian missionaries respond? They looked at their history and found people who weren't afraid of death. Those people knew that God was their rock. God would protect them and provide for them until the day that it was time to go to heaven. That gave them strength and courage. They stood up to evil rulers and evil people, even though it meant giving their lives. They were the martyrs of the Church. The lives of those people were celebrated on All Saints Day.

So, I think the missionaries said, "Hey, we have a holiday that celebrates eternal life in Jesus.

“It celebrates people who weren’t afraid. Let’s move it to the time when people are most afraid of death.”

Does this all sound familiar? Sure, it does. It sounds familiar because today, people are faced with death and disease and running out of the things they need to live. And what do people do when they’re faced with scary things? They get scared.

Ladies and Gentlemen, there is nothing new about people being scared by disease and death. There’s nothing new being afraid of running out of the things you need to live. Fortunately, there is something that has always been around when people are afraid - The rock that is higher than we are. God has always been there, ready to listen when his people cry out to him. David did that. And David was miraculously rescued.

As he had prayed, he was not just rescued for the moment. He was able to complete the mission that God sent him to do. He lived a full, long life and left a dynasty of kings. A thousand years later, that line of kings eventually ended with Jesus Christ. And Jesus is the ultimate example of a man who didn’t fear death. When Jesus came to earth, he didn’t need to be led to the rock - He was the rock.

RESPONSE

So, how do we respond? Ask yourself: Are you facing a crisis? If so, cry out to God. That’s what David did. Ask God to lead you to the rock that is higher than any of us. But don’t just ask to be saved from a threat. Ask to be called to something higher: Service to God and others.

When believers think of the rock that is higher than us, we tend to think of something higher in strength. And that’s true. We tend to think of a higher place that will make us safe. And that’s true, too. But could it be that the rock that is higher than we are also represents another kind of height? Could it be that the rock that is higher than we also represents something of a higher purpose - A higher calling?

God can save us from threats and bring us to safety. That’s great. God can save us from death and bring us to life. That’s wonderful. God can save us from hell and bring us to heaven. That’s fantastic. But God can also save us from a life where we live only for ourselves. He can bring us to a place where we live for him and for others. That, my friends, is the highest place.

The world faces great threats. Those who don’t have God in their lives become afraid. They live in fear. If you face a threat, cry out to God. Ask him to lead you to the rock that is higher than any of us. And then ask him to help you to live the fullest and most meaningful kind of life - A life of service to him and others.

May God answer us as we cry out to him.