

A PRAYER FOR HELP AND PRAISE FOR THE ANSWER

Psalms 28; 29

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Tonight we're going to take two psalms since we have two relatively short psalms before us. They are completely contrasting and different from one another. I'm not taking them together because they have similar themes but simply because I'd like to keep moving as expeditiously through the Psalter as we can. Where we've got a moment where we need to slow down in a bigger psalm we'll do that later. Where we can take a smaller psalm in a more rapid fashion we'll do that.

I. Psalm 28:1-9 (NIV)

“To you I call, O LORD my Rock; do not turn a deaf ear to me. For if you remain silent, I will be like those who have gone down to the pit. Hear my cry for mercy as I call to you for help, as I lift up my hands toward your Most Holy Place. Do not drag me away with the wicked, with those who do evil, who speak cordially with their neighbors but harbor malice in their hearts. Repay them for their deeds and for their evil work; repay them for what their hands have done and bring back upon them what they deserve. Since they show no regard for the works of the LORD and what his hands have done, he will tear them down and never build them up again. Praise be to the LORD, for he has heard my cry for mercy. The LORD is my strength and my shield; my heart trusts in him, and I am helped. My heart leaps for joy and I will give thanks to him in song. The LORD is the strength of his people, a fortress of salvation for his anointed one. Save your people and bless your inheritance; be their shepherd and carry them forever.”

This psalm might be titled “A Prayer for Help and Praise for the Answer.” So many of the psalms are prayers to use when we are in trouble. As we have now progressed to this twenty-eighth

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psalm, so far we have already seen nine of the first twenty-seven psalms or a good third of the psalms we have covered so far are what might be called laments. A cry of “I’m in trouble. I need help.” These laments have a lot of similarity and yet too they fit into the divergent needs that may be present in our life. The laments we’ve looked at so far are found in Psalm 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 10, 11, 13, and 25. I mention that because when you’re studying the psalms on your own it’s always helpful when you have sufficient time to go back and lay it against another and see how this psalm may individualize in a given situation. Or when we’re going through a pack of trouble in our life it doesn’t hurt us to get out all the lament psalms and just go through them all at one time. We may need a megadose. People may take a megadose of vitamins; we would probably do well to take a megadose of the lament psalms while we’re at it.

The psalm before us this evening—as the title I’ve given it suggests—the psalm is divided into two parts. Verses 1–5 constitute a prayer or plea for help. Then the mood of the psalm switches so that in verses 6–9 we have a praise for the answer.

We’ll take each of these parts in turn.

A. The first five verses reflect a brief prayer for help in trouble. What kind of trouble David is in and it is ascribed to David, as have all the other psalms except Psalm 1. There are sometimes discussion among people who are serious scholars of the Old Testament as to whether these superscriptions of the psalm are part of the original autographs or were added later in order to identify them as belonging in a group. Most conservative evangelical Bible scholars who understand these subscribe to David as being a part of the impact of the psalm itself. They belong to David and were not written by a later person. That would be my view. But there’s not a lot of empirical, objective evidence to corroborate either view except what is written in the text—the psalm of David. We’re not sure at what point—since we don’t have the original text—that little

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superscription got in there. But we know at least from earliest times and we do have manuscripts of the Old Testament that date back over twenty centuries. Those manuscripts all have this in them so that this goes back a long, long time.

There's nothing within the content of the psalm itself other than the superscription that indicates David particularly. But he is in this psalm in some kind of trouble, the specifics of which we are not explicitly told. It may be that he is ill for there is a hint of death at the close of the first verse. "If You don't help me God, if You remain silent, I'm going to be like those who go down to the pit." The word for "pit" is the Hebrew word *Sheol* which is the place of the dead. So some have thought that perhaps this psalm is linked to a time of illness. Although we will see as we keep moving through the Psalter there are some very, very specific psalms to use in regard to illness that are very clearly illness psalms.

Others have suggested that rather than being ill, he is a victim of people who have acted falsely against him. He's been victimized. Verse 3 may give a hint of that. "Do not drag me away with the wicked, with those who do evil, who speak cordially with their neighbors but harbor malice in their hearts." That is somebody who is nicey-nice with him and turns around and stabs him in the back. So he is in trouble over that. Probably one of the things we have going for us that is the most easily damaged and hardest to replace is our character and reputation. If that's assaulted by someone who has been speaking ill of us then that leads us into a time of inner turmoil and trouble.

Others have even suggested that the trouble may not be individual but it may be national. That is, the nation as a whole may be in some kind of jam. And David as their king is giving a representative prayer and that might be hinted at in the last verse of the psalm where David is praying and giving thanks not simply praying for himself but is praying a psalm that embraces

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the whole nation. “Save your people and bless your inheritance; be their shepherd and carry them forever” (verse 9, NIV).

Again who knows what the particular moment is of trouble. But trouble comes in many varieties. It’s like Christmas gifts—they come in shapes and sizes and all kinds of wrappings and there’s all kinds of surprises in the wrappings. Whatever your particular pack of trouble might be it’s a good psalm to pray through. That’s why these psalms are given: to help us pray.

The invocation of the psalm betrays David’s profound inner distress and feeling of insecurity. There’s evidently been a period in his life when it does not appear that his prayers are getting through. I’ve had the problem. At this point David is concerned in relationship with God. One is that He is deaf and the other is He is dumb. Not intelligent dumb but dumb in speech sense. If God is not listening and if God is not speaking then we really are in trouble.

In this particular moment there’s evidently been a period of time when God has been silent with David and it does not seem like God is listening. Why do we feel like God is not listening?

Because after we’ve prayed for a period of time, nothing is changing, nothing is getting through, it’s the same old thing. “God! Haven’t You heard me? I’ve asked for help. How many times do You want me to come to You, Lord?”

So as he comes to this moment of intensity in prayer he is asking God not to abandon him to a fate which would be equivalent to death. He calls upon the Lord as his rock. “O LORD, my rock” (Psalm 28:1, NIV). We often say “Father,” or “Shepherd,” or “Lord.” But how many have thought to use “rock”? I confess I don’t. If I were more in the outdoors and saw the protection that great rocks provided that imagery might be more easily transferable. It’s interesting in the Old Testament God is referred to specifically thirty-three times as “rock.” The reason behind that metaphor, that physical illusion to God as rock, is that a rock suggests permanence, strength,

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defense, support. Therefore, in a time when it appears that God is deaf and dumb, David is overriding those natural emotions that have come to him because God has seemingly not acted too quickly on his prayer. “Lord, regardless of where I am emotionally in addressing You in prayer, I realize that You really are my rock, You are my support, You are my strength, You are my permanence, You are my shelter. You are the one person I can go to and find safety in.”

The Lord as a rock is therefore quite a contrast to those who go down into the pit. If God doesn’t come through for me I’m going to go down to this place called *Sheol*.

God’s always been like we know Him as revealed by Jesus. But they didn’t always see it that way in the Old Testament. There was fog. They didn’t always see the afterlife in the clear perspective Christ has brought us because of His resurrection. For some of the Old Testament people and especially here for David, *Sheol*, the place of the dead, was a shadowy kind of world. I don’t want to go down into nothingness. God, if You’re my rock I’ll have a place of stability. As David appeals to the Lord he just simply asks that the Lord would help him. It’s a perfectly appropriate phrase to ask of someone who is our rock. As he asked for help he is doing something very typical in Old Testament praying—lifting His hands in the direction of Jerusalem. Where the ark of the covenant in David’s day rested which was the most holy place. Probably by this time the ark of the covenant was there. Then in later generations when his psalm was used and the temple was there and the Holy of Holies was there, people would face toward Jerusalem and pray and remind themselves that God answers from His holy hill, to use one of the psalmist’s praises.

The psalm then takes kind of a strange turn because in asking God to help, David senses that God maybe needs to do something about the wicked who are part of his problem. A vital part of David’s plea for help is that he not be dragged off with the wicked but rather that God would

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repay them for their deeds. In past points in the Psalter we see words like “repay them for their deeds and for their evil work,” or “break their teeth in their jaw,” or something like this, which David doesn’t use in this particular psalm. But we call these “imprecatory psalms,” meaning that here’s some bad end being asked upon those who do wrong. We’ve suggested in the past as we’ve looked at these that one of the things that God allows in the psalm, that God allows them to pray what is naturally on their heart. And that the psalm has to be interpreted by the word of Jesus, which tells us to go beyond praying like this and say “Forgive our enemies. Not just repay them but forgive them.”

I’ve been thinking that maybe I’ve been overboard in spiritualizing these imprecatory psalms and saying in the New Testament context they’re not always fitting. From the standpoint of the holiness and the justice of God we know that if a person doesn’t respond to the prayer of Jesus which was “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34), but if they go ahead and do it anyway that ultimately within the New Testament itself we are told that God brings His judgment upon those who disobey Him. We will make null and void the atonement if we do away with the idea that there is actual punishment for sin. That in the end everything does not turn out ok for everybody. Maybe on our own holy lips this kind of prayer may be at times inappropriate because we get a lot of our own human anger and vengeance mixed up with it. But certainly from God’s vantage point there will be a day of reckoning with those who having been shown the works of the Lord and do not do them. Their house will be torn down and never built up again. Very serious phraseology in the psalms. David says, “Lord, don’t let me have any part of that.” That ought to be the distinctive attitude of us as Christians. “Lord, whatever You’re building in my life, let it stand forever.”

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B. In verses 6–9 the second part of the psalm gets underway, which is a praise to the Lord for the answer. How different is the tone of these last verses than the first verse or two where David starts out very insecure and wondering if God is hearing and speaking. That uncertainty and insecurity have now given way to a joyful assurance of salvation. David knows that he has been heard. The Lord has not only proven himself to be a rock but His ears have become unstopped. He has heard. Indeed the Lord has heard.

I think it's a great statement and assurance of faith to recognize that God hears all our prayers. Maybe sometimes we don't use language correctly and we say after we've prayed. If we've gotten the answer we wanted we say, "The Lord heard my prayer." But in actual fact the Lord hears all prayer. Sometimes He responds in different ways than what we may have wanted. But in David's case the Lord's ears are not stopped up and He has become more than a rock. He has become a strength and a shield. Joy has been given him again. Note in the case of many other lament psalms there is no mention of any external change of David's circumstances. That is, between verse 5 and 6 there is nothing noted like "God suddenly appeared with a squadron of angels and they got me out of this jam and they zapped all the people that were doing me in." Nothing externally is noted. But what prayer does is prayer changes us first and fundamentally and foundationally. David, as he has waited upon the Lord, as he's come to his prayers and started out by saying, "God, do You really hear? Do You really speak?" He's spent those moments in the presence of the Lord, reminding himself of the future judgment that God will bring. His faith has been revived in his prayer so that as he's getting through his praying, he has come to a moment of confidence. It seems to me that that is one of the great things that prayer does do for us.

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There are times when we may feel too tired to pray. Or too discouraged to pray. Or too profoundly shaken to pray. But it's when we bring ourselves—no matter how tired or discouraged or shaken or whatever—to the place of prayer and begin praying that we are renewed. I think going to church and taking part in singing hymns or a Bible study we become alive again. David has that. He's been in God's presence and revived and renewed. That's the best tonic there is, being in the Lord's presence.

So David closes with a great show of confidence. Isn't it interesting that when God does something for us we can universalize it for everybody else? "If God helped me, He's going to help you too." So David jumps out of himself into what God is doing for all people. "The LORD is the strength of his people" (Psalm 28:8, NIV). Not just strength for me but strength for everybody. "A fortress of salvation for his anointed one." Here is a clear reference, I think, to the Messiah. This psalm could have very appropriately been prayed on the lips of Jesus when He was in a moment of danger or trouble in His own life. Kind of a prayer appropriate for the Garden of Gethsemane even. Although there are prayers in the Psalter which even more directly zero in on Gethsemane. But certainly this is one that could have had clear reference to a time such as Gethsemane.

That's that beautiful little psalm which is a lament. Praying to God for His help then thanking God and praising Him for His answer.

II. The next psalm which we'll fly straight into is Psalm 29, which I like to title, "God Over the Storm."

If I were locating this storm within a New Testament setting—which obviously it wasn't written within a New Testament setting—but if there's one place in the New Testament where it certainly fits it's Mark 4 and the storm at sea. It's too bad that the disciples were in so much

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danger that they really didn't appreciate how much this psalm described their storm. I suppose if we get into any storms ourselves that are spiritual or psychological or emotional in nature, it helps to go back to a nature psalm like this and remember how God is the Lord over the storm. This psalm actually celebrates the glory of God in a thunderstorm. It is the third psalm thus far in the Psalter, it's the third psalm thus far that is what might be called a creation hymn or a nature psalm. The other two so far which have preceded it are Psalm 8, which focuses upon God's majesty and our dignity, and Psalm 19, which speaks of the glory of God in skies and Scriptures. So this becomes the third nature psalm in the Psalter. The clear reference is to a thunderstorm. A thunderstorm is an awe-inspiring event. David finds himself watching a thunderstorm and seeing more than a display of nature but seeing God's omnipotence, God's power. He finds therefore in the storm an assurance and a comfort. The God who can do such mighty wonders in nature is a God powerful enough to sustain His people. One of the things you'll see David doing in the psalm is he will be taking something out of nature and relating it to our everyday life and suggesting to us that if God is so powerful to bring such a storm into being He is powerful enough to watch over Israel, His peopled world. Some have thought that this psalm was especially suited for use by the nation of Israel in the Old Testament period when the seasons of rains was beginning. Thunderstorms were building up and it was therefore time to get out Psalm 29 and celebrate the God of the storm.

A. There are basically three parts to the psalm. Verses 1–2 are what might be called a summons to the celestial host. Or a summons to the angelic host, the sons of God. Picture in your mind, first of all, David creates the setting for this storm. The storm is getting ready to blow up. But the thing that David wants to do first of all is to summon the angelic host to begin giving God praise. He says, "Ascribe to the LORD, O mighty ones, ascribe to the LORD glory and strength. Ascribe

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to the LORD the glory due his name; worship the LORD in the splendor of his holiness” (Psalm 29:1–2, NIV). Why does David summon the celestial hosts to be the ones who praise God at the beginning of this storm? It’s because it serves as an overture of a theme that’s going to be stated. Instead of letting the praise to the Lord here originate from the inner life, David sees the balcony of heaven or the grandstands of heaven filled with all the mighty angelic hosts who are praising God. He is saying that there is a celestial sanctuary that is watching the storm and celebrating with man the awesome mighty power and dignity of God. That the tongues of men alone are not adequate to praise God as He’s worthy of being praised. And that by summoning the celestial hosts to praise God the psalmist is reminding worshippers on earth they’re not worshipping God all by themselves. We are joining in the worship of the heavens. That’s a great theme picked up in Revelation. What it’s suggesting in the New Testament time, I think, is what this psalm did in the Old Testament time. Suggesting to God’s people that it may look like you’re getting battered now, but if you’ll just close your eyes and tune up your ears and turn on your inner eye, you’re going to see that the Lord God omnipotent reigneth and He’s being praised and adored by angels and by elders and by living ones and by saints before you. So tune in your heart and join in the praise of heaven because you’re not alone. That’s tremendous encouragement to a church that’s going through troubles. The worship of heaven and earth are joined. That’s what this psalm is doing within the Old Testament setting. Saying to heaven, come on join in! The angels are invited to worship God.

B. We come to the second part of the psalm which celebrates the Lord manifesting himself in the storm, verses 3–9. The children of Israel were always struggling with Baal worship. Baal worship was the celebration of God in the process of nature. Some Jews at this time would try to combine these two elements, at times be a worshipper of Baal and at times try to be a worshipper of

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Jehovah. Jehovah was regarded as the great eternal God, up there, the God of history. But Baal was the earthly God, the God who was in control of local places and trees and mountains and rivers and nature and sex and winter and death. There was this subtle divorce that sometimes happened between Jehovah and Baal. One of the things historically this psalm sets out to correct, and doctrinally, is the perception that God is not in the storm. The storm is not something related to Baal. The storm is that which God has brought about and is a real blow against this idol worshipper within Israel's history.

David is picturing himself on a hill and he sees out on the ocean the storm gathering. He's seeing the storm arising. He says, "The voice of the LORD is over the waters" (verse 3, NIV). He can begin to hear the thunderclaps out there. "The God of glory thunders, the LORD thunders over the mighty waters. The voice of the LORD is powerful" (verses 3–4, NIV). "Voice of the LORD" is mentioned seven times in these short verses 3–9. God's voice in the storm. The voice of the Lord is powerful, the voice of the Lord is majestic, the voice of the Lord.

Now he probably switches direction. Now the storm is coming over him and passing east and coming across Galilee up into the Lebanon. What's the storm doing? "The voice of the LORD breaks the cedars" (verse 5, NIV). The lightning is hitting them and they're cracking and splitting. "He makes Lebanon skip like a calf" (verse 6, NIV). That is when the Lord kicks up the storm; it's like a calf suddenly jumping and frolicking. A sudden gust of wind in a storm does that. He makes "Sirion like a young wild ox" (verse 6, NIV). That is, the storm has the power of a bull. David sees the storm moving out beyond the mountains, even going into the south.

What David is really saying here is the power of God in nature is an awesome power to be reckoned with. We should not so de-personify nature that God is seen as something abstract from nature. Weather is an awesome thing.

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What this psalm is saying—is reminding us who live now in a technological age, where we think we have the answers for everything—that nature is still under God’s command. And still at His control. He creates it and moves it and we ought not to just be blasé about these incredible displays of creative strength we see within nature. We ought to adore the strength of the God who reveals himself in such awesome power. That’s why this particular section closes with the phrase “And in his temple all cry, ‘Glory!’” (verse 9, NIV). The response of the worshipper at such a sight is to be filled with wonder and adoration of God who can create something so fantastic.

C. Verses 10–11 give the third and last part of this psalm. The lessons from the storm. “The LORD sits enthroned over the flood; the LORD is enthroned as King forever. The LORD gives strength to his people; the LORD blesses his people with peace [*shalom*]” (NIV).

We come to these last two verses. The storm has ceased. The Lord has commanded the elements, loosing them initially and now restraining them. Now as the storm has ceased we see Him sitting enthroned over the flood. The word which is used here for flood is used elsewhere in the Old Testament only to describe the flood of Noah’s day. What it is saying by reminding us that God sits enthroned over the flood is that God is always above the storm. He remains untouched by constantly changing events here on earth. Just as He did when God rode above the flood in Noah’s day, so the Lord sits enthroned as the victor over all chaos and as King He will always sit enthroned. There is no one that is going to share His throne with Him or usurp Him. He sits enthroned. Scripture is reminding us who’s got the power that doesn’t change and in whom we must have faith.

It’s not just something about nature but something about history. God reigns over the affairs of mankind. The tranquility of God over the storm is meant to assure us in the midst of our own

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turmoil on earth that there is a quiet and a calm that we can have. Since we rule and reign and are seated with Christ in heavenly places we too may be enthroned over the flood in the sense that we're held safe and secure when elements are breaking around us. We're kept by Him. His ability to respond is manifested in the creation; His willingness to respond is demonstrated in the covenant. In other words, God's ability to work is seen in creation. But His willingness to respond is seen in the fact that in the covenant, which in the Old Testament is a covenant He made with Abraham and with David, in the covenant God keeps His word to His people. In the covenant that God has made with us through Christ He keeps His word to us that we may be kept in Him.

Next time you're out in a thunderstorm or you wake up at night and lightning is flashing and the thunder is rolling, turn to Psalm 29 and celebrate God over the storm. Or maybe in your emotional life or spiritual life when the fireworks are going off and the thunder is rolling and the lightning is flashing and it's scary, be reminded who God is whom we serve. What we believe about God determines how we behave. If we understand and know that God rules and reigns it will indeed affect how we get through our daily and real-life problems. If we begin to move away from a solid conviction of who God is and what He represents and things that are certain then we become uncertain in our own actions and we open ourselves potentially to sin or to despondency or any kind of a number of things that can really drag us down. But when we understand who God is we're encouraged and strengthened and helped along in life.