

HELP, LORD!

SERIES: PATTERNS FOR PRAYER

by Steve Zeisler

Psalm 11:3 asks a profound question: "when the foundations are being destroyed, what can the righteous do?" Now with lesser problems there might be a variety of answers. When things are momentarily difficult, what can the righteous do? Well, the righteous might have an opportunity to say something or initiate changes. But that's not the question. The question is, when the *foundations* are being destroyed, what can the righteous do? We might read that question as a despairing *cry* of being overwhelmed: What can we possibly do under circumstances like this? But I don't think it is. If you read the verse in context it's a serious question being asked. What is the assignment or the calling for people like you and me when over-whelmingly difficult circumstances-the destruction of foundations-take place?

Shaky times

We live in times that correspond to the kind of circumstances this question asks about. We're on the verge of war in the Persian Gulf for all we know, and wars never stay well-contained, do they? The capacity for destruction, long-term hatred, violence, and loss is tremendous. All of us have been living on the edge of our seats, listening to hopes being alternately floated and dashed. I personally watch my teenage son closely and think frightening thoughts about the future of wars, drafts, and deaths. It's hard not to be aware that there is a shaking of foundations under circumstances that our president has called the most dangerous since the second world war. Further, our economy is in a recession, and droughts here in California affect our circumstances directly. We face diseases for which we have no cures and racism that seems more virulent and entrenched than ever.

So the question is pertinent. When foundations are shaky and crumbling, what should the righteous do? What should people do whose righteousness is in Christ, not derived from themselves but granted them by God, people like us who are called righteous by the Lord?

When the foundations are being lost, we have only one option, since we can't fix anything-we can't turn the economy around and we can't stave off war. No action that any person in this room or that all of us put together can take is going to shore up foundations. What we can do is turn our face to the living God. We can become men and women who pray.

The book of Psalms is the prayer book of the Bible. Every generation as far back as far we can look has learned to pray by reading the psalms, by praying them, and by hearing them prayed. The course we've set ourselves for the next few weeks is to learn about prayer by studying the psalms. The opening psalms have a common theme. We asked the question last week in Psalm 8, "What is man that you are mindful of him?" Most of the early psalms are fairly short, and they take up the question of what it means to be human and the great contrast between the godly and the unrighteous. This morning we're going to consider Psalms 12 and 13, and we want to learn about prayer as a result of these studies together. Let's look at Psalm 12 first:

**Help, LORD, for the godly are no more;
the faithful have vanished from among men.**

Everyone lies to his neighbor;

their flattering lips speak with deception.

May the LORD cut off all flattering lips
and every boastful tongue that says,

"We will triumph with our tongues; we own our lips -- who is our master?"

"Because of the oppression of the weak and the groaning of the needy,
I will now arise," says the LORD.

"I will protect them from those who malign them."

And the words of the LORD are flawless,
like silver refined in a furnace of clay, purified seven times.

O LORD, you will keep us safe and protect us from such people forever.

The wicked freely strut about when what is vile is honored among men.

The church is not what it ought to be, and the world is in desperate straits as a result

Verse 1 begins with the most basic prayer of all: "Help, Lord." It doesn't get more basic than that. "Help, because I'm desperate. Lord, you are master. Help, because you love me." It's a cry that is always appropriate. As basic as it is, it never outlives its usefulness. It's an enduring prayer. It is the beginning point an acknowledgement of our need and a cry to God for help.

The basic problem

The rest of verse 1 describes the basic human problem: "...for the godly are no more; the faithful have vanished from among men." The essential problem, from a Biblical perspective is not that wicked people are wicked. The deepest concern, the most critical source of problems in the race is that righteous people are failing; the faithful are dwindling. It is the loss of the spiritual reality among people who know God, who ought to love him, serve him, and support one another. Desperate times have descended when you seek godliness among his people and don't find it. That is when the foundations are crumbling. The people of God are the light of the world, the salt that keeps corruption from taking place. So it is when you turn, as he says in verse 2, to your neighbor, your brother or sister in Christ, and don't find Christian reality, that the basic prayer, "Help, Lord!" addresses the basic problem.

Think about David's experience. We know some of his history. David fought many enemies. He led armies to war against the Canaanite tribes around him. Probably the greatest battle scene that comes to mind when we think of David is the one in which Goliath, a nine-foot giant standing in the middle of the valley, denounced the armies of Israel. David asked the pertinent question: "who is this uncircumcised Philistine that he should defy the armies of the living God?" Goliath the giant warrior fell to a sling and a stone in the hand of David. But David's most difficult enemies were not the wicked, the giants, the warriors who arrayed themselves for the sake of idols against the people of God. David's most pain-filled experiences of enmity were when his son Absalom rebelled against him, and when Saul, the anointed of the Lord, attacked him. Those were the most heartrending times, the battles that were toughest to fight. When someone we expect to be our brother or sister turns out not to be, when our neighbor is a liar, when our cohort or friend turns out to be faithless, then like David we find ourselves crying out, "Help, Lord!" because the godly are no more.

Let's look at verses 2-4: "Everyone lies to his neighbor; their flattering lips speak with deception. May the LORD cut off all flattering lips and every boastful tongue that says, 'We will triumph with our tongues; we own our lip -- who is our master?'" The faithful are being lost on the earth, and there are two essential points that are made in these verses: Truth has been sacrificed, and arrogance is prevailing. No one is telling the truth anymore. There are three words in verse 2 which all refer in some way or other to the fact that truth has been abandoned or denied. The NIV translates them lies, flattering lips, and deception. As a result of the commitment to lies, human arrogance increases. Indulging in flattery, hypocrisy, and lies leads eventually to a

sense that I'm in charge; I can hurt and use people, promote myself, and say what I want; I'm master of my own lip -- arrogant to the core.

Flattery and hypocrisy

Think about what is being suggested here. It is among the people of God, not the wicked but us, that we find increasing hypocrisy, according to David in this psalm. That is the tragedy--when we no longer have a commitment to truth. Now, it's not as if the people of God have disappeared. Your neighbor is still there; it's just that he or she is no longer godly. They have the appearance of one thing--they're flattering, they still speak smoothly and sweetly, and they still say the same thing -- but they're not the same person on the inside. The godly are no more because the inside is decaying, because they're hypocrites. That's the tragedy of this psalm, and that's the reason for the cry, "Help, Lord! Do something, please, Lord!"

I clipped an article out of the newspaper yesterday. In Detroit, "the pastor of a fundamentalist church confessed to robbing 14 banks over 16 months and spending the stolen \$50,000 to pay for prostitutes. [That pretty much wraps it up in one sentence!] . . .

Neighbors, fellow ministers, and members of Yanke's congregation described him as a caring, friendly family man. 'It's unbelievable because he's such a wonderful man,' said June Badder, a member of Yanke's church." He appeared to be one thing, but he turned out to be something else.

This week we had a week-long seminar here. Lawrence Crabb put on a wonderful and powerful discussion of his role as a teacher and counselor. In a discussion over lunch, he made a point that stuck with me. He was talking about how much it is true in churches like ours that people are living lies that are killing them, and how Christian counseling is mushrooming as a phenomenon because there are whole fabrics of lies that are deliberately chosen. You're all familiar, I'm sure, with 12-step groups, the term co-dependency, and all of the lengthy discussion that's going on everywhere in our culture among Christians and non-Christians alike about dysfunctional families, in which members grow up deliberately learning a system of lies. For instance, the father's an alcoholic but nobody says that to him or about him; the family members all learn to pretend it's not true and reinforce this dishonesty with one another. There's an incredible sense of violation when children are trampled emotionally and pretend they're not.

It happens among us in the church. Lies are being told; truth is being lost. Eventually, what grows in that soil is arrogance, the stance that it is better to be this way than any other. Those who control the system to their advantage like it the way it is. Dysfunctional, beaten, depressed, and miserable people can be used and taken advantage of. Lives are being lost, and it's happening among Christians, not just out there but in here. I know of people -- friends, those who are well-spoken of, involved in some kind of ministry in leadership who at some crisis point leave the church. When you go back and ask, they say their marriage was in painful shape for years and no one ever knew; they never said. They had fought and had been in a kind of vicious misery at home, but when they went to church they seemed fine. There are any number of examples of this kind of problem; you can probably think of some yourself.

Our own vulnerability

David is decrying the loss of truth, and he's praying that God will intervene. Let me ask you to do one other thing before we move on from this point. Let's think again about what we know of David's life. He won victory after victory, he led a band of barely capable outlaws in triumph against stronger armies, he fought the giant and won, he served as king in Israel, he wrote the psalms, and he led people in worship and danced before the Lord. Now, what was the time of David's greatest failure, that sowed pain throughout his whole family so that his own child later rebelled? The greatest example of failure in David's life was the erecting of an elaborate lie. He fell into sin with Bathsheba, and then in order to cover up the adultery, he erected a whole framework of deception, murdered his friend, on and on and on, intending to live as if his sin were not what it was. He was finally confronted by the prophet Nathan. Now, the point he's making here in Psalm 12 is exactly his own failure. All of a sudden the concentric circles get smaller and smaller, don't they? It's not the wicked person's sin that's the problem, it's some other righteous person's sin. You can imagine David saying to himself, it's not even just them, it's me! It's not just among my neighbors that lies are told; I tell lies. I'm

willing to pretend to be something I'm not.

We don't talk often enough in the terms of Romans 7:21-25:

So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. What a wretched man I am? Who will rescue me from this body of death?

I have within myself an enemy, the possibility of choosing arrogance and deception. I have all of the instincts, ideas, and possibilities right here in me. Maybe I will become the liar. Maybe I will be the righteous man who is no longer righteous on the inside, the hypocrite, and will contribute to the destruction of the foundation. But it's hard for us to talk about that. It's hard for us to have honest conversations where we say, "Yes, there's a war in me; I'm tempted to do this and I have done it; I live this way; I'm weak, and I fail." Yet as David recognizes, where honesty is lost arrogance grows. Where we find arrogance growing, especially among the people of God, the cry for help must be lifted because the foundations are crumbling. The church is not what it ought to be, and the world is in desperate straits as a result.

David's wrestling with God in prayer occurs at the same time that he acknowledges his own vulnerability

Psalm 12 goes on in verse 5 to say that God will act. He speaks in the first person: "'Because of the oppression of the weak and the groaning of the needy, I will now arise,' says the LORD. 'I will protect them from those who malign them.' And the words of the LORD are flawless, like silver refined in a furnace of day, purified seven times. O LORD, you will keep us safe and protect us from such people forever. The wicked freely strut about when what is vile is honored among men." God has been called on for help, and he answers the simple, basic prayer, "Help, Lord I" The answer is in verse 5; he says he will arise and take action. There is protection in God.

Waiting for God to act

But I want to ask you to think about one more element of our experience in calling on the Lord in prayer. Between the description and lamenting of the problem in verse 4 and God's arising and acting in some specific way in verse 5, very often for us there's a time lag. The "Help, Lord!" prayer may not be immediately and completely answered. That's what Psalm 13, the next prayer, is about. Psalm 12:6 notes that the Lord's words are flawless like refined silver. He is the truth himself, and he brings truth to answer the lies. He becomes the protector of the needy. He's going to act. But our experience is apt to be like Psalm 13 in that there is a wrestling in prayer that takes place.

This is the sort of prayer that is for the interim between the cry for help and the prayer of thanks that looks back on what God has done. Psalm 13:

How long, O LORD?
Will you forget me forever?
How long will you hide your face from me?
How long must I wrestle with my thoughts
and every day have sorrow in my heart?
How long will my enemy triumph over me?

Look on me and answer, O LORD my God.
Give light to my eyes,
or I will sleep in death;
my enemy will say, "I have over come him;"
and my foes will rejoice when I fall,

But I trust in your unfailing love;

my heart rejoices in your salvation.
I will sing to the LORD,
for he has been good to me.

Four times in the first two verses the cry, "How long?" is lifted. We can imagine, using the language of Psalm 12, that David is longing for the excellent purity of truth from God that's refined seven times. Yet he senses no response at all to his prayers. The emotional sensation is that God has turned his face from David. He says it twice in verse 1:

"Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?" It isn't unusual for us to experience that. When we seek the Lord for help in difficult circumstances, we may very well find that there is no effect on our emotions at all, that nothing seems different. His nearness is no more clear to us than before. The sense of being approved of by him, having him show his face to us, and having him visit us with his smile may not take place.

Wrestling in prayer

David has asked a serious question, and it's a proper question. There's an impatience to it, but it's an honest impatience. Real prayer is not routine. Too often we think of prayer as something that exists in a compartment at a certain time during the day or the week. There's a kind of routine reciting of words; we fulfill an obligation. But prayer is much more akin to wrestling. It's much more likely to be shouting, stomping one's foot, and crying out things like, "I don't understand, this isn't the way it ought to be! Lord, where are you in the midst of it? Lord, why is this world the way it is? Why are these people the way they are, and why am I the way I am? How long will it be until you answer? I'd love to see your face again! How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and every day have sorrow in my heart?"

Verse 3 expands on that question: "Look on me and answer." We can see David and all since who share his struggle walking around under the stars shaking their fists at heaven, crying out, "Answer me! I've asked for your help, how you do something about it! This hurts, I'm tired of having it hurt! I don't understand. . . . Answer me!" This prayer experience is not just some idle accumulation of religious phrases. This is a real conversation, and we expect a real answer.

David goes on then and imagines two things happening. "Give light to my eyes or I will sleep in death." He's saying he's afraid that if God doesn't answer, he's going to quit. He's afraid he will slide off into a kind of slumber and stop fighting the good fight. Sleep is a way of shutting everything down. There's no light left, the eyes are closed, the war's over. I think this metaphor is suggesting that he is going to lose his willingness to stay awake. He won't care anymore. In the book "The Spirit of St. Louis," Charles Lindbergh told of flying across the Atlantic all by himself. His greatest agony was to stay awake the whole time. He went through a cycle where he just literally could not keep his eyes open. The plane would dip close to the water, and if he had given up and fallen asleep he would have died. David is afraid here that either he will quit, or, as he says in verse 4, "My enemy will triumph over me." He thinks of his enemy astride him, laughing at him, defeating him. David's wrestling with God in prayer occurs at the same time he acknowledges his own vulnerabilities. He fears that he will quit or be defeated.

Singing a song

What I'm suggesting to us is that we're in times of shaky foundations. We're in times when there's very little we can do that's going to fix things. And what should the righteous do when the foundations are being destroyed? I think the answer is in the examples, "Help, Lord!" as the basic prayer, and then "How long, Lord?" as prevailing in prayer, staying with it, assuming he'll answer. God says he will arise and do something about it, but the interim may be longer than we want. The avenue he chooses to come to us may be a surprise. Our hope is to be as Psalm 13 describes it, those who prevail in prayer, those who take prayer seriously, those who are honest.

Psalm 13 ends with a song. Verse 5: "But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation." In the long run he's applying faith to the problem; he does trust the Lord. And the Lord will respond. "I will sing

to the LORD, for he has been good to me." The interior wrestling with his thoughts, crying out exclamations to God out loud or inside, worrying before the Lord, wondering, learning, hurting, growing, all has taken place, and it ends with a song. God is good and faithful to us. His salvation is sure. Righteousness can be learned again if it has been lost. Truth can rise back to its proper place in our lives if deceptions have entered in. Prayer that wrestles with Cod, that's willing to be honest, is the concern before us. By the grace of God it will result in singing for us as well.

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