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Second in a Series: Summer in the Psalms

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Romans 8:22-26
Psalm 143:1-10

It Matters How We Pray

For your name's sake, O LORD, preserve my life. In your righteousness bring me out of trouble.

In your steadfast love cut off my enemies, and destroy all my adversaries, for I am your servant.
– Psalm 143:11-12



In the late 1960's a psychiatrist named Thomas Anthony Harris published a self-help book called *I'm OK; You're OK*, based on Eric Berne's theory of Transactional Analysis. The book sold 7 million copies and spent two years on the *Times* bestseller list. It helped a lot of people. One Sunday a certain minister gave the book a rave review during the sermon. After the service, when he was greeting people at the door after the service, an older lady came up to him and shook his hand.

"I haven't read the book," she said, "But maybe you should read the Bible. As you were preaching today I couldn't help but think of Cain and Abel, Moses and that whole Golden Calf business, and David and Bathsheba. Even more, I kept thinking of Jesus on the Cross saying to those who were watching him die:

'If everybody's okay, what am I doing up here?'"ⁱ

It's true. We are NOT okay. The tragic suicides of two well-known Americans in the last two weeks have taught us a painful lesson about our ability to cure ourselves. Depression is a brutal disease because depression lies; it lies convincingly. Depression is not the only enemy we face, but it is one of the most formidable, a devastating enemy. One sufferer, a journalist and author named Reba Riley described it this way. She wrote:

"Depression uses pain to bury you in Darkness so black and full of fury, they would do anything—anything—to make it stop. ... It whispers lies to you in your own voice."

Then this important warning. "Do not believe Depression's lies. The lies are spoken in your voice, but they are NOT YOU."ⁱⁱ

In today's psalm the songwriter is battling a powerful enemy. We don't know who or what the enemy is – whether it is an external enemy or an internal one – all we know is that it is devastating, and the psalmist is crying out to God. I'm going to do something a little different today as we consider the psalm together. I'm going to leave the text on the screen as we consider the verses together. The first stanza begins with the psalmist crying out to God for help:

*Hear my prayer, O LORD;
give ear to my appeal for mercy*

*in your faithfulness; answer me in your justice
Do not judge me;
for no one living is proved right before you.*

The psalmist acknowledges that he's not blameless. After all, who is? He never claims that he *deserves* God's help. Instead he appeals to God's character, God's mercy and justice. God is both great and good, and we are . . . not. It matters how we pray. Humility is key. I hate to think how many times I have lifted some frantic appeal to God – talked on and on – without ever acknowledging my own mistakes and all the ways I have contributed to the problem.

And here is the problem. Whatever, or whoever the psalmist enemy is:

*My enemy has pursued me,
crushing my life to the ground,
making me sit in darkness like those long dead.

Therefore my spirit faints within me;
my heart within me is desolate.*

There is a scene in a Lily Tomlin movie called *The Incredible Shrinking Woman*. She had some kind of chemical exposure. It's a familiar plot. As a result Lily finds herself becoming smaller and smaller, until she is so tiny that she's in danger of being washed down the kitchen drain. You see her swirling around in the sink desperately trying to find something that she can hold on to. That's something like the psalmist's situation.

I have been there. Haven't you? There have been times when circumstances seemed to swirl around me. Life is hard. When you are waiting for the doctor to call with the test results, or when you find out your job is going away, or when someone you deeply love does not know how to love you, you can follow the psalmist's lead.

It matters how you pray. This psalm gives us a pattern for prayer, appealing not to our deserving, but to God's covenant faithfulness. Look:

*I remember the days of old,
I think about all your deeds,
I meditate on the works of your hands.*

Remember; remember; remember. You and I come to know God intimately by learning about God, by recalling the ways God has worked in the past. We discover God's character as we "think about all God's deeds," the Mighty Acts of God, and the personal interactions, those large and small, those "God moments" we experience every day.

*I stretch out my hands to you;
my soul thirsts for you like a parched land.*

*Answer me quickly, O LORD;
my spirit fails.*

*Do not hide your face from me,
or I shall be like those who go down to the Pit.
Let me hear of your steadfast love in the morning,
for in you I put my trust.*

*Teach me the way I should go,
for to you I lift up my soul.*

It matters how we pray. Honesty, humility, memory, persistence are all a part of Psalm 143. The song gives us good instruction for our own prayers. Will Willimon tells the story of something that happened in church. It was Dedication Sunday and everyone in the congregation was bringing their pledge commitments forward, placing them on the communion table. Some members crossed themselves as they silently dedicated their gifts to God. Some offered quiet, personal prayers. There was a homeless woman who was worshipping with them that Sunday. She came forward too. People were glancing at each other, wondering what she had to offer. When the woman reached the chancel steps, she flung herself down on the carpet, arms extended, arms outstretched, palms open to the cross. Will said that there were two elders standing by assigned to collect the pledges from the table. One turned to the other and said, “Now, that’s a dedication!”ⁱⁱⁱ

This psalm teaches us how to pray. Anne Lamott says that there are really only three prayers uttered by humans. They are “Help,” “Thanks” and “Wow.”^{iv} Here the psalmist’s prayer is “Help!”

*Save me, O LORD, from my enemies;
I have fled to you for refuge.*

Tradition has it that this psalm was written by King David. We don’t know for sure, but if it was David, verse 9 makes good sense. David had a lot of enemies. King Saul, David’s predecessor on the throne, suffered from mental illness and repeatedly tried to kill David. Later, David’s son, Absalom, led a revolt against his father and tried to take the throne from him. David had to seek refuge to save his life. (Yes, David *and* Jesus both were refugees and asylum seekers.)

David had enemies. He was a man after God’s own heart, but there were times when he was, in his own words, “troubled...mourning all the day long... groaning because of the great turmoil in my heart.”^v You find that angst all through the psalms of David. God’s own man had enemies within and without. The worst by far was despair.

By God’s grace, David knew how to pray. Paul says in Romans 8 that “we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit helps us... the Spirit prays on our behalf, with sighs too deep for words.” David had God’s spirit. He prayed:

*Teach me to do your will,
for you are my God.
Let your good spirit lead me
on a level path.*

It matters how we pray. *That* is the right prayer, the perfect prayer. “Teach me to do your will, for you are my God...let your good spirit lead me.” So much of the time we come to God in prayer – demanding various things, begging for this or that – when what we most need is to do God’s will. It matters how we pray.

The love of God is boundless. Depression and other kinds of mental illnesses are enemies that cut far too many lives short, but even mental illness is no match for God’s “hesed,” God’s lovingkindness. David seems to know that, because he prays:

*For your name's sake, O LORD, preserve my life.
In your righteousness bring me out of trouble.
In your steadfast love cut off my enemies,
and destroy all my adversaries,
for I am your servant.*

In life and in death we belong to God. It matters how we pray. “Preserve my life” is the right prayer. Listen: It’s okay to not be okay. Do you hear that? Depression is no stranger to people of faith. It’s courageous to say “I need help. This enemy is stealing the best of me.” Reba Riley, the author I mentioned earlier confesses that two years ago depression came close to killing her. Regarding Kate Spade’s and Anthony Bourdain’s suicides, she wrote:

“I still feel [depression’s] icy fingers clutching at my heart, my hands, when I read their stories of loss.”

Her warning is raw and sincere:

“If you hear the whispers: Do not believe Depression’s lies. The lies are spoken in your voice, but they are NOT YOU. When it tells you to die, stay alive.

When it tells you the world would be better without you, stay alive.

When it tells you every day will be a cloud of dark, forever, stay alive.”

Then she gets personal: “I learned this lesson the hard way—but not the hardest way. Not the way that would have gutted my husband, parents, sisters, and put me in a grave. ...

I asked for help; if I fought my way back to light, you can, too.

Now I speak, coach and write about Transformation through everyday courage, radical kindness, and the journey of becoming well.

But by far

The bravest thing I have ever done is stay alive.

The kindest thing I’ve ever done is stay alive.

The way to becoming well began with the choice to stay alive.

Stay alive. Ask for help. You are worth it.”^{vi}

Pray: Preserve my life. Pray with David...that is the right prayer. It matters how we pray. Pray, “in your steadfast love, destroy my enemy.” “For your name’s sake; preserve my life.”

You don’t know how to pray that way and neither do I, but the Spirit helps us. The Spirit intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words.

It matters how we pray, but prayer alone is not enough. We have a mental health crisis in this country. We have a mental health crisis right here in our own community. In order to meet that crisis, it is going to require good medicine, but medicine alone is not enough. We need a radical renewal; we need the love and mercy of Jesus Christ, the steadfast love of God that the psalmist describes. Nothing else can come close – no enemy can touch the power of that love!

Scripture asks:

Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written,

*'For your sake we are being killed all day long;
we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.'*

Yes, we are. Mental illness is a brutal killer. But it doesn't have to be. In the power of the Holy Spirit you can pray with David: "in your steadfast love, destroy this enemy." "For your name's sake; preserve my life."

Stay alive because, even in all our trouble and fear, even in those times when we are pursued by cruel enemies:

We are more than conquerors through Christ who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Let's pray together:

We stand before you, God, arms outstretched to you. Our souls thirst for you like dry land. We all face different enemies. Your steadfast love is the one constant in the universe. You are the source of all help. Your love is justice and peace. Hear our prayers and come to us. Preserve our life, in Jesus' name.

ⁱ Jim Forest, *Confession: Doorway to Forgiveness*, Orbis, 2002, 2.

ⁱⁱ "Stay Alive: The Dual Tragedies of Kate Spade and Anthony Bourdain," *Patheos*, June 8, 2018

www.patheos.com/blogs/faithforward/2018/06/stay-alive-the-dual-tragedies-of-kate-spade-and-anthony-bourdain/

ⁱⁱⁱ I read this many years ago in William Willimon's *Pulpit Resource*. I no longer have the reference.

^{iv} Anne LaMott, *Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers*, Riverhead, 2012

^v Psalm 38:6,9

^{vi} Riley, op. cit.