

A Present Help in Trouble (Praise Night)

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[0 : 00] A reading from Psalm 22, verses 1-2 and 14-19, which is a promise that was fulfilled at the cross of Jesus Christ.

These words were spoken from the mouth of Jesus. And the text reads, A reading from Psalm 130 for those who are crying out from the pit.

And the text says, Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord. O Lord, hear my voice. Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my pleas for mercy. If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness that you may be feared.

So I wait for the Lord. My soul waits. And in His word I hope. My soul waits for the Lord. More than watchman for the morning. More than watchman for the morning.

O Israel, hope in the Lord. For with the Lord there is steadfast love. And with Him is plentiful redemption. And He will redeem Israel from all His iniquities.

[2 : 03] And we'll read the Bible one more time together. From Psalm 46. And we'll read the first seven verses. And the writer writes this.

God is our strength and God is our refuge, excuse me, and strength. A very present help in trouble. Therefore, we will not fear, though the earth gives way, though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble at its swelling. There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High. God is in the midst of her. She shall not be moved.

God will help her when morning dawns. The nations rage. The kingdoms totter. He utters His voice and the earth melts. The Lord of hosts is with us.

The God of Jacob is our fortress. This is God's holy word. Now, if I had any power around here at all, I would make the harmony group sing the psalms every single Sunday.

[3 : 12] But I don't have that power. So we'll pray for it. And we'll ask them, plead with them to come back next Sunday. Let me just point out four things about the psalm.

This is a psalm about facing trouble. So let me just point out four things very briefly about it. First, what's the trouble that's being talked about here in this psalm? So at the very beginning, verse 1, there's a mention of trouble.

And then in verse 2, the text does not open gently at all. It says that though the earth gives way, though the mountains fall and be moved into the heart of the sea, though the waters of the sea roar and foam.

So there's this image here of a reversal of creation. The idea is almost that everything God established in Genesis 1, the order is being turned upside down. And the mountains, instead of being established, they're falling into the sea.

So it has this picture of a great tsunami and earthquake and things literally falling apart. What is this event that the psalm writer is talking about that makes the world feel like the mountains are falling into the sea?

[4 : 16] And if you look down at verse 4, you'll see that right after that, the city is mentioned, the city of God there. And if you were to just cast your eyes across the rest of the psalm, the nations are raging, the kingdoms are tottering, the Lord of hosts is defending His people.

It says in verse 9, we didn't read that far, but God makes wars to cease. And so it's very, very probable here that the trouble, the trouble that's mentioned in verse 1, is that the city of Jerusalem is being besieged.

So this idea of the mountains falling into the sea and the earth trembling is metaphorical language for somebody's world being flipped upside down. The writer, whatever they're going through, it literally feels like decreation is happening.

So if you are an ancient person living in the ancient Near East, and you live in a city, you probably live in a city that has walls all the way around it.

And when an invading army comes to besiege you, they typically surround you, and they might cut off your food supply, they cut off your water supply, they starve you out, they attack you.

[5 : 23] And I can't even imagine what it must be like to be an ancient person living in a city that is under siege. And, you know, you had a peaceful existence, and all of a sudden your world is absolutely being torn apart.

And so if you are a victim of that in the ancient world, you are undoubtedly going to die, or you're going to see part of your family be killed, or you're going to be taken into slavery, and all sorts of unspeakable horrors are probably going to happen to you.

And that's the trouble that's being talked about metaphorically probably, very probably, in the psalm. Two applications, two lessons, let me mention here.

The Bible does not run past the hardest realities of human life. So sometimes people come and say about Christianity or about religion in general, I can't believe in God because of how hard life is and how much suffering there is, how much evil, and how much pain and trouble there is in this world. But I just want you to notice that the Bible never glosses over the depth of trouble that this life brings. Instead, the Bible talks about it very openly and very honestly, and even provides language to name it and to experience it, provides a way of experiencing it, songs to sing while you're experiencing it.

[6 : 37] And in fact, in the midst of that, that language that the Bible provides, Christianity gives a real gift, and that's explanatory power to why we suffer so much. And so every religion, every philosophy, every worldview has to face this question, what is the source of suffering and evil in this world?

And all the different religions give different answers to that, and secular humanism or naturalism gives a different answer to that. But Christianity comes and says that the troubles you are experiencing really are troubles.

They're not a mirage of neurons firing in your head. It's not an illusion. Evil is not an illusion like Buddhism says. And evil is not an illusion like secular naturalism says. And instead, trouble really is trouble.

And you see, the problem with trouble, if you don't believe in God, is that for trouble to be trouble, you have to call it evil. And to be evil, you have to believe that there is such a thing as the good. You see, evil is parasitic upon the good. And without the good, without a transcendent good, you cannot even talk about evil, you see. And so Christianity provides this real explanatory power to be able to actually say, trouble really is trouble.

[7 : 48] It never glosses over it. It names it. It calls it out. Suffering is a human problem that every single one of us face. The second application, and I'll move on, is that not only does the Bible not gloss over real trouble, but I think this psalm exists to simply point out the fact that most of us know something of what's being talked about here.

So the writer says, the mountains are literally falling into the sea. Metaphorically falling into the sea because their world is being turned upside down. And I would imagine that there are many of you here tonight that have had an event like this where you can say something like this, where you have had the earth move beneath your feet, a tectonic shift, the mountains feel to be falling into the sea because of something that's happened to you, because of that 2 a.m. phone call that you never expected in your life, because of that person that you lost, that you never thought you'd have to say goodbye to this early, because even of the simple reality of losing that job or that thing that you had so pursued that you thought, this is going to make sense of my life, this is going to give me my identity, but then it was taken from you.

And it was like the mountains falling into the sea. It was like your city, the city you have built, has been besieged. And so I just want to say first that the Bible never glosses over this reality, trouble. Secondly, what does the God of the Bible say to us in the midst of trouble, in the midst of suffering? And the text is really clear. It says God is our refuge. So God is our refuge.

God is our strength. And then thirdly, God is our very present help in trouble. Notice that as this writer is under siege, his life changing before his eyes, he doesn't say God will fortify the refuge.

[9 : 40] God will keep these walls intact. He doesn't say God will make me strong enough to be able to defeat my enemies. Instead, he says God is my refuge.

I hide in him. God is my strength, even when I have none. And so what the Bible does, it says that God, the God of the Bible, who made the world, who is present at all times in this world by the Holy Spirit, that God is very near, very close to those who are walking through deep pain and deep trouble and deep suffering.

And so the Bible doesn't say that God will prevent every disaster. He has a rescue plan and it will come one day. But what the Bible says is God will give you company in every disaster.

He will be with you. He will be a very present help to you, very near to you in trouble. There's so much mystery about suffering and evil and the pain that we all experience. And the Bible does not answer every question about the mystery of death and the mystery of suffering and the mystery of evil.

But the riddles of God, the riddles of God are far more satisfying than the solutions of men. And here we're being told that God will be near you when you suffer.

[10:53] It's very simple and very true. Imagine, I've got five children, so I don't have to imagine this, but many of you know what I'm talking about where it's the middle of the night.

We keep two monitors running in our house, baby monitors at all times because we live downstairs and our kids live upstairs. And so we have to put monitors in different places to figure out who is crying where in the house in the middle of the night.

And they both feed into our bedroom on different sides while we sleep. When a child cries out in the middle of the night and they say, I'm afraid, I'm so afraid.

When a child cries out and says, I'm hurt, I'm hurt, something's wrong with me. They do not want a lecture on the nature of darkness. They don't want to be told, you know, if you really understood what darkness is, you wouldn't be afraid of it.

It's simply an absence of light and you don't have to be afraid. They don't want to be told, hey, this pain is temporary, it's going to go away. What do they want? What do they want when they cry out? What does the sufferer, the little child want in the darkness?

[11:55] They want their dad to come and be with them. They want their mom to stay and give them a hug. They want presence. And we want the same thing. We want presence. God the Father says that He will be near to you in the midst of your trouble.

That's what Christianity offers. Thirdly, that's vague. You say, maybe. That's vague. That needs to be more specific and I think so too. And so, there's a more specific answer in this passage and it's in verse 4.

It says, there is a river whose streams make glad the city of God. So, in siege warfare in the ancient Near East, if you were going to besiege a city like Jerusalem, you would surround it and you would cut off the food supply and you would cut off the water supply and it would not take very long, especially if there was no water supply to make the inhabitants surrender.

If there is a river running through the city that is being besieged, it is almost impossible to make that work. If there is a water supply running through the heart of the city, a great army can surround it but it's very hard to get the people to surrender because they have a source of life.

It can sustain them. It can keep them. And so, in the midst of trouble, we're being told here, how is God very near to you? And then we read about this great city. There is a city.

[13:14] See, if you're living in Jerusalem as this psalmist probably was and your city is being besieged, there is no river running through the middle of Jerusalem. There wasn't in the ancient Near East. There was a Hezekiah's tunnel eventually that did have water underneath it but in general, there's no river and there's no river running through the city of Jerusalem today and that means that what's happening here is a great sufferer is writing a song saying, I imagine a city where there is a river running through it.

And that city is the city of God and God is there and that river will give me what I need for all my days. So, what this psalm does is says, the Christian has the ability to use your imagination in the midst of suffering and plead the promises of God and say, my city is being besieged and there is no river giving me a water supply at the moment but I know that God says there is a city that is to come that has an eternal river that will quench the thirst of all who suffer.

And when we come to the New Testament, we read about two different kinds of cities. There's an earthly city like Edinburgh, like Jerusalem, like any of the earthly cities and every single one of the earthly cities is eventually going to rot.

Every one of the earthly cities is temporary, it's earthly but there's citizenship in another city and that's the city of God and that's the city that's being talked about right here and there's a river in the

heart of that city that can satisfy you for all of your days and the New Testament says this is how God is very present, very near to you that Jesus Christ is that river.

Jesus Christ is the river. He says to us in John chapter 7, if anybody thirst, come to me and drink. Even now, even now, the text John 7 says in the midst of trouble whoever believes in me out of his heart will flow a river of living water that you even now in the midst of trouble can have a river flowing from your heart, a Christ, the Christ who will never leave you or forsake you.

[15:17] He didn't, Jesus Christ, he didn't stay away from trouble. Every worldview, every religion, every philosophy needs to say something about the nature of suffering, the nature of evil and a solution to this great dilemma and while the Bible does not answer every single question there is of the great mystery of suffering and death, what it tells us is that God himself did not stay away from trouble.

He entered into it. The Son of God came and he faced trouble head on. He experienced trouble beyond our imagination at the cross so that we might drink from the river of the city of God.

That's the promise. That's how God says he will be very near to you. Revelation 22 is this great vision of the new heavens and the new earth where heaven has come down. Christ has brought heaven down to earth and there's a river running through the middle of it and it says that river makes the people of the city glad.

It gives life to everything and that river is Jesus Christ himself. He promises that when you believe in him he really will be present with you even in this life by the Holy Spirit and especially in the times of your greatest trouble.

So lastly, what do you do with your suffering even tonight? Let me ask you, are you a citizen of the eternal city? By faith, you can be a citizen of the eternal city and have a hope in the midst of your suffering.

[16:38] Jonathan Edwards was a pretty well-known famous theologian and president of Princeton in the United States in the 18th century and he wrote a famous sermon that has been used many, many times.

There's a good chance many of you in here if you're around church much have heard this before but he talked about in this sermon the practical benefits of following Jesus when facing suffering and so they are very practical.

Let me just list them for you as we finish. Jonathan Edwards said and this is more modern language than he gave, your bad things will be turned to good, your bad things will be turned to good and your best things are still ahead of you.

So when you have Jesus in your life in the midst of suffering your bad things will be turned into good and your best is still ahead of you and he's thinking there of Romans 8, 28 all things work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose and this is not cheap comfort, it's not dismissal of injustice, it's not dismissal of all the grievances that have occurred and the suffering that has taken place.

The Bible names it and says it's great evil, it's corruption, sin has brought so much pain in this world but in the mystery of God, God tells us that somehow, some way, all things will work together for the good of those who love him and so we can look and say something like just because I can't think of a good reason that God would allow pain and suffering and evil in this life doesn't mean there isn't one.

[18:06] Somehow, some way, all things will work together for the good of those who love him. In Dostoyevsky's great novel, The Brothers Karamazov, there's two characters, Ivan and Alyosha and Ivan is regularly the chorus line throughout the book of talking about human cruelty and suffering and pain and it's really a book, it's a wonderful novel focused on the problem of evil and there's one moment where Alyosha responds to Ivan and Ivan had been talking about all the misery of this human life and this is what Alyosha writes through Dostoyevsky's hand, I believe like a child that suffering will be healed and made up for, that in the world's finale, something so precious will come to pass that it will suffice for all hearts, for the comforting of all resentments, for the atonement of all the crimes of humanity, of all the blood they've shed, that it will make it not only possible to forgive, but somehow to justify all that has happened.

I believe like a child, somehow, some way that suffering will be healed and made up for in the last day. Death is not the end. The last thing Edwards says is your good things, if you believe in Jesus today, your good things cannot be taken away from you in this life, even in the midst of suffering.

So if you have God as a father, Jesus Christ as your savior, redeemer, and elder brother, and the Holy Spirit as your daily companion, your good things cannot be taken away from you.

You have reconciliation with God, the thing you were made for, God himself, that will never be taken away from you. You have an identity in him that will never leave you no matter what you suffer. No matter how much your city, your personal city, is besieged in this life.

When you are with God, you have something that you can never lose, and it's the very best thing, and that's relationship with him, the very thing you were made for. There's a story, I don't know if it's true, but by tradition at least, about Martin Luther.

[20 : 06] He was a great reformer in Germany in the 1500s, and the story says that on the threat of execution, he was walking into a room where he thought he was going to be executed, and Martin Luther reportedly turned to his sidekick, Philip Melancthon, and he said, come Philip, let us sing the 46th.

That's Psalm 46. Luther knew, I might be executed in this room, I'm not sure, but he said, let's sing the 46th. I know I'm a citizen of a better city, one where the sufferings of this present life cannot finally touch me, one where the river of the living God will flow forever.

Are you a citizen of the eternal city? Let me pray for us. Father, we ask that tonight we would consider that.

Lord, help us in our hearts to consider whether or not we have faith in the Christ who can give us citizenship in the eternal city, one whose river will never cease to flow.

Lord, we feel the weight of suffering in this life, the wounds, there are wounds represented here in these seats, there is pain represented here, there's great evil that has been done against many, and of course, we all have committed great sins as well, and so we come tonight as people in need of a better city.

[21 : 30] And so we thank you, oh Lord, that you have established a better city, a city whose foundations stretch to the heavens and go into eternity, a city where Jesus Christ is king.

So I do ask now, Lord, as we sing this final hymn, that you would help us to consider that question, are we citizens of the heavenly city? And we pray that in Christ's name. Amen.