

A THANKSGIVING QUARTET IN TWO PARTS I. “Deliverance from Loneliness and Depression”

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Psalm 107
Focus, 1-16

INTRODUCTION

I sometimes think Thanksgiving is our most spiritual holiday. While it isn't commemorating any special Biblical event, it is a call to remember and be alert to all God's blessings in our lives. John Calvin claimed that one reason to pray is to turn our complaining hearts into grateful hearts. When we get thanksgiving right—“Praise God from Whom all blessings flow”—it places our hearts in right relationship with our Creator.

For these two Sundays that bracket Thanksgiving Day, I'm focusing upon the 107th Psalm, a Psalm of praise for God's deliverance. I believe all of us have known God's interventions in our lives, whether we recognize them or not. This Psalm speaks of four groups of witnesses to God's power to deliver when “they cried out to the Lord in their trouble” (6, 13, 19, 28). In the troubles talked about, we find loneliness, depression, sickness, and the storms of life. In each case, we have a witness talking about their trouble and how God intervened to deliver them.

As you turn to Psalm 107 in your Bibles, note that it stands at the beginning of Book V of the Psalms— the last book in the Psalter which will end in great cannonades of praise. Here we start, as most of us do on our Christian journey, with God's intervention, His deliverance of us in the midst of trouble. The first three verses are a call to praise which we'll do responsively.

READ Ps. 107

“Let the redeemed of the Lord say so— those he redeemed from the hand of the foe” (2). Several years ago, I was at a Young Life camp— of course I was *way* beyond the age when you could be a camper, but they let pastor's come for the week to just hang around and participate however much they wanted. At the end of the week, they had what they called a “Say So”— taken from this Psalm vs. 2— *Let the redeemed of the Lord say so—*. It was absolutely thrilling to see high school students stand before hundreds of their peers and proclaim how the Lord had redeemed them that week. Marvelous deliverances were proclaimed. And that's what this Psalm does.

The first two groups of witnesses talk about loneliness and depression. Next Sunday, we'll focus upon the other two witnesses.

LONELINESS

Some wandered in desert wasteland,

finding no way to a city where they could settle. (4)

As I read that, I see loneliness— there is no community. God’s deliverance leads him to a city where he can live in community. As such, I’m taking the hunger, the thirst, the feeling of life ebbing away in a more metaphorical sense of emotional distress. Certainly this can be taken as a literal circumstance, being lost in a desert wasteland. However, because of the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, it is legitimate to interpret Scripture at several levels. In each of these stories of deliverance I want us to enter into the emotional distress conveyed.

Chuckie Willis was a red headed, freckled kid in my third grade class who like to boss everybody around. Every recess, he’d organize all the boys into a gang of cowboys. These were the days of the Lone Ranger and Roy Rogers and playing cowboys and Indians was the game to play, at least in our part of Montana. We didn’t have any Indians— we just pretended. Chuckie would lead the gang, running around the back of the school house, get them in a huddle for a strategy session, then they’d race off to the corner of the school yard, and back. Mostly it seemed, he liked giving orders. There were three or four in his inner circle of leadership, and I was not one of them.

Well, to me the game seemed pointless. Nobody was chasing us and we weren’t chasing anybody. Everybody just ran behind Chuckie, wherever he wanted to go. I got tired of that and just began standing around waiting for the bell to ring. Then the report cards came out, and in the “comments” section, the teacher said she was concerned about Kenny because he wasn’t playing much with others at recess. So, I realized, it looks bad to be alone. I resolved I needed to at least look like I was in the gang to avoid concern from my teacher. Therefore, every recess I forced myself to run after Chuckie and at the next report card, the teacher said, “Kenny is doing much better at playing with others.” But inside, I felt just as alone as when I just stood by the steps waiting for the bell to ring.

I wonder if that isn’t a picture of a lot of our world. Statistics tell us the majority of Americans feel lonely on the inside. Several years ago, there was a survey by the magazine, “Psychology Today.” Loneliness was the most frequent problem mentioned by people. Dr. Tim Johnson, the medical consultant for ABC News, says he thinks the most devastating disorder in our society is loneliness. Four in ten Americans admit to frequent feelings of intense loneliness. We’ve learned to hide it well, running around, doing what everyone else is doing. Sometimes there is almost a frantic togetherness— a fear of being alone. Dr. Albert Schwietzer writes, “We are all so much together, and yet we are all dying of loneliness.” Deep loneliness saps our life energy, doesn’t it. It feels like, as the Psalmist expresses, our “lives ebb away”(5).

I recall being asked to meet with a high school student who was having some problems. When we got together, I asked him what he thought his biggest problem was. He said, “I don’t have any friends.” I was surprised, because every time I saw this teen, he was with friends. He had a great personality and seemed to be quite popular. As we talked, I found out what he was really saying was that he had no one really close with whom he felt he could just be himself— beyond all the facades and public persona he used to be accepted by his peers. His heart was lonely,

crying out for an intimate friend.

Tragically, suicide rates among teens have tripled in the last couple of decades. It is the third leading cause of death among them, after accidents and homicides. And, loneliness is the number one cause of suicide for teens.

God created us as social beings. We are made to live in community with others. In Gen. 2:18, God says, *It is not good that man should be alone*. So, God created community in providing Adam with Eve. In addition, they had intimate fellowship with God who would come down and walk and talk with them in the garden (Gen. 3:8-10). One of the first effects of sin after the fall is that they suddenly are hiding from God and embarrassment enters into the relationship between Adam and Eve so that they now need to hide from each other behind clothes.

The nature of sin is to divide, destroy community, and alienate us from one another. The nature of godliness is to unite, bring us together. Sin infects relationships with rivalry, jealousy, pride, hatred, selfishness, and sows seeds of mistrust. C. S. Lewis, in his imaginative picture of heaven and hell in The Great Divorce, pictures hell as the opposite of community— everyone isolated, separated by infinite distances of darkness. On the other hand, godliness bears fruits like love, joy, peace, patience, gentleness, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, and self-control. Everyone of those fruits of the Spirit are community enhancing— building healthy, life-giving relationships.

The Psalmist speaks of God's deliverance, Ps 107:6-7

*Then they cried out to the LORD in their trouble,
and he delivered them from their distress.
He led them by a straight way
to a city where they could settle.*

God provides us with a nurturing community. Cities in that day didn't have the negative connotation we sometimes give them. They were places of warmth, security, support, caring, with supplies of food and water.

True Christian community must start with a right relationship with Christ. Note how Paul states this in 2 Cor 5:17-19,

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation.

We become a new creation, getting the sin cleaned out of our hearts. As we are made right with God, we then are in a position to get other people reconciled with God and with one another. God has designed the church to be our primary community beyond the family. We need to keep applying His grace and growing in the Spirit to truly be the inclusive, satisfying, joy-filled community of love He wants.

Last weekend was Veteran's Day. I came across a fascinating story from D-Day. Shortly after midnight on June 6, 1944, the 101st Airborne Division parachuted into the darkness of France.

Their mission was to link up with one another and secure the key bridges and crossroads for the soldiers who would be landing on the beaches that morning. But things didn't go as planned. Heavy cloud cover and poor visibility forced the planes to separate before they reached their drop zones. As a result, soldiers were dropped miles from one another all over the French countryside. In the early morning darkness and confusion, General Maxwell Taylor, commander of the 101st Airborne, found himself all alone in the dark. When he spotted another soldier groping his way through the darkness, he demanded he identify himself. It was one of his troops. The two were so overjoyed at finding one another, they put aside military protocol and hugged each other. General Taylor said, "It was at that very moment I knew we were going to win the war."

The power of coming together in community, united in a common love. That is also a picture of the church. When we learn to embrace one another, rejoicing and celebrating our oneness in Christ, the church will be the force to change the world God intended it to be. We must not let anything keep us isolated, separated from one another. Our love for one another should define us to the world as true disciples of Jesus (Jn. 13:35).

DEPRESSION

*Some sat in darkness and the deepest gloom,
prisoners suffering in iron chains,
for they had rebelled against the words of God
and despised the counsel of the Most High.
So he subjected them to bitter labor;
they stumbled, and there was no one to help. (Ps 107:10-12)*

Isn't that a picture of depression— darkness, deepest gloom, suffering in iron chains, bitter labor, stumbling with no one to help? If you've ever been seriously depressed, you can identify with those words.

Depression has been referred to as the "common cold" of emotions. Did you know that 10% of Americans are depressed most of the time and 80% are occasionally depressed. Christian psychiatrist, Dr. Archibald Hart, says that depression is the most complicated of all our emotions. So I do not want to offer simplistic, pat answers— nor does Scripture. Many times in the Psalms, we see an honesty in pouring out feelings of depression.

Sometimes there is a spiritual component to depression. But, let me be clear that this is not always the case, just sometimes. In the case of this witness in the 107th Psalm, that is mentioned,
*for they had rebelled against the words of God
and despised the counsel of the Most High. (11)*

One often cited cause of depression is anger we stuff down inside. Depression is sometimes referred to as frozen rage. When you find yourself depressed, a creative question to ask is, "What or who am I angry at?" That anger can be toward other people we live with or encounter. We can be angry at ourselves, feeling we've messed up badly in life. We certainly can beat up on ourselves. Institutions like the government can bring out anger in us. Circumstances people feel are unfair often precipitate anger. And, we can even be angry at God. Maybe God hasn't helped

you like you think He should or allowed these bad things to happen. Life doesn't suit you and it's God's fault, you think.

Can you see how this kind of anger is ultimately a rebellion against God? He is in control of all things. When we make ourselves the measure of all things, when we don't like things, we blame God. The way out of this kind of depression is accepting God's ways, even if we don't understand them or like them. A little formula that was shared with me years ago that has a lot of truth in it goes like this: "Depression— Die to self and press on." Die to self. Let go of your demands of God and life. Turn it all over to Him in surrender to His will. Then, get pressing on. Refuse to excuse ourselves. Push yourself to get out in the flow of things again.

That's what the witness in this Psalm give testimony to. Note vs. 13-16:

*Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble,
and he saved them from their distress.
He brought them out of darkness and the deepest gloom
and broke away their chains.
Let them give thanks to the LORD for his unfailing love
and his wonderful deeds for men,
for he breaks down gates of bronze
and cuts through bars of iron.*

Those of us studying John Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress in Sunday School will relate to this in Giant Despair and the dungeon in Doubting Castle. When we cry out to the Lord and again embrace His Word and apply His promises, we soon are walking in the light again.

However, while this applies to a lot of our depression, there are some depressions with a medical component, involving chemical imbalances. That is a whole different category and should not be treated as a spiritual problem. What I'm saying here only touches the surface. Don't try to figure it out on your own. Get professional help.

At age 30, Florence wrote in her diary, "My God, what will become of me? I have no desire to live but to die." But, as she cried to the Lord, the dark clouds of despair that had been dogging her life began to give way to the light and she discovered a new purpose that consumed her life until she died at the age of 90. She reorganized the hospitals of England and some believe she was instrumental in introducing antiseptics and chloroform into general use. She did much for the advancement of medicine to relieve human suffering in the 19th century. Her name was Florence Nightingale, founder of the nursing profession.

CONCLUSION

"Let the redeemed of the Lord say so— those he redeemed from the hand of the foe." Almost all of us here can give some witness to the Lord's power to save, redeem, and deliver. Let this Thanksgiving be a time of celebrating our stories of deliverance. Let's find ways to share them with each other. Join our two witnesses this morning.

Share with those who are lonely, feeling disconnected, God's invitation to community. We are surrounded by lonely people. Perhaps you need to hear it yourself. The wonderful news is that, as you sincerely cry out to God, He has a way to bring you out of the desert wastelands and into the warmth and security of Christian community.

Some are bound by the bonds of depression. Cry out to the Lord, and die to self and press on. Give witness to the deliverance God brings— bringing us out of deepest gloom, breaking away the chains that bind us.

“Let the redeemed of the Lord say so— those he redeemed from the hand of the foe.”