

And the Rain Came – Psalm 124

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The Book of Heroic Failures contains a story about how British firefighters went on strike back in 1978. The British army filled in while the firefighters were off the job.

One afternoon, the replacement firefighters got a call to rescue a cat caught high in a tree. The soldiers rushed to the scene, put up a ladder, brought down the cat and gave it back to the owner. The cat's owner was so grateful that she invited them in for tea, an invitation they accepted. After a wonderful time, they said goodbye, got in the truck and backed away — over the cat.

Which prompts the question, “Could that rescue mission really be considered a success?”

Have you ever had to be rescued? Have you ever been driving your car and gotten stuck in a flood and had the car washed away by the flood waters? Have you ever been in a terrible accident and been so severely hurt that you couldn't walk away? Have you ever been beaten by someone either physically, verbally, or otherwise?

I pray you haven't found yourselves in these situations, but if you have you've been in mighty need of a rescue.

Hearing stories of people who've gone through these awful experiences, there is a common feeling among all victims, in addition to the pain they've endured. It's a deep feeling of isolation, a perpetual sense that they are all alone with a fear that nobody will know they are trapped or embroiled in such agony.

There perhaps is no feeling worse than that of being all alone with nobody to turn to. The feeling that nobody is on your side—searching for you, empathizing with you, fighting for you—is maybe the worst. Isolation also comes not only when you're in danger but when you've found yourself all alone on one side of an issue or in an argument. Or it's when you've moved to a new community and left your friends and family behind.

The question we have a tendency to ask is, “Will someone come alongside me? Is anybody on our side?”

Psalm 124 is one of the best psalms. It is a great statement of faith, a testament to a people’s belief that, despite the threats it has endured, they have not been alone.

“If it had not been the Lord who was on our side—let Israel now say—if it had not been the Lord who was on our side, when our enemies attacked us, then they would have swallowed us up, the flood would have swept us away, the torrent would have gone over us, and the raging waters would have gone over us.”

“We have escaped like a bird from the snare of the fowlers; our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth.”

In these words, Israel is expressing its joy and thanksgiving in what God had done for them. God was on their side when nobody else was. God came to their rescue when it looked like they had been forgotten.

Quite the affirmation!

For all of us who at some point find ourselves in danger or in great isolation, I hope that one day we can proclaim with the same boldness the thanks we have in God who comes alongside us and convinces us that he is walking our journey with us.

That is our hope. That when all others are gone, God will be present.

The late Peter J. Gomes, chaplain of the Memorial Church at Harvard University, wrote a book titled *The Scandalous Gospel of Jesus Christ: What Is So Good About the Good News?* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007). He tells about a time some years ago when South African novelist Alan Paton spoke at Harvard. At the time, the apartheid regime of Paton’s home country appeared to be close to collapse, and a black majority government would soon take over. Many people feared that massive bloodshed was imminent. During a question-and-answer time, a woman asked Paton, “Given all that you have said and we have heard, are you optimistic about the future of your beloved country?” Paton replied, “I am not optimistic, but I

remain hopeful.”

Gomes wrote that he thought much about that distinction between optimism and hope ever since. He recalled that Dietrich Bonhoeffer once warned against cheap grace. Similarly, Gomes warned against “cheap hope.” He explains: “Hope is not merely the optimistic view that somehow everything will turn out all right in the end if everyone just does as we do. Hope is more rugged, the more muscular view that even if things don’t turn out all right and aren’t all right, we endure through and beyond the times that disappoint or threaten to destroy us.”

At the beginning of our hope and at the end is Jesus Christ, who endured and remained faithful to God when he found himself in great peril. When Christ found himself in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night of his arrest, he was by himself (or so we thought). The walls of Roman authority were closing in around him, he had just been betrayed by one of his closest followers, and it wouldn’t be long before he would be imprisoned unjustly.

Yet in that isolation, he trusted that he was not alone. He had a conversation with his God, who was very much present and on his side. “Father, if you are willing,” he pleaded, “take this cup from me; yet not my will but yours be done.”

Amidst his plea for rescue first came a confidence that he wasn’t by himself in that difficult hour.

He might not have been optimistic, but he was hopeful—hopeful in a God who would not let him down even in the midst of the terrible suffering he was about to endure.

That hope was Christ’s rescue. And what Jesus endured is always our hope, too, when we wonder if anybody else is around.

Near the city of Sao Jose dos Campos, Brazil, is a remarkable facility. In the 1970s, the Brazilian government turned a prison over to two Christians. The institution was renamed Humaita, and the plan was to run it on Christian principles. With the exception of two full-time staff, all the work is done by inmates. Families outside the prison adopt an inmate to work with during and after his term.

Chuck Colson, the former Watergate conspirator who later became a Christian and the founder of Prison Ministry, visited the prison and made this report:

When I visited Humaita I found the inmates smiling - particularly the murderer who held the keys, opened the gates and let me in. Wherever I walked I saw men at peace. I saw clean living areas, people working industriously. The walls were decorated with biblical sayings from Psalms and Proverbs My guide escorted me to the notorious prison cell once used for torture. Today, he told me, that block houses only a single inmate. As we reached the end of a long concrete corridor and he put the key in the lock, he paused and asked, 'Are you sure you want to go in?'

'Of course,' I replied impatiently, 'I've been in isolation cells all over the world.' Slowly he swung open the massive door, and I saw the prisoner in that punishment cell: a crucifix, beautifully carved by the Humaita inmates - the prisoner Jesus, hanging on a cross.

'He's doing time for the rest of us,' my guide said softly.

When it seems we are all alone in our prison cells, our abusive homes, our bad marriages or relationships, our hospital beds, or our addictions, Christ our hope is still there putting in the time with us.

It is that hope, therefore, that gives us a special capacity. It is that hope that gives us the capacity to put one foot in front of the other when we'd just as soon curl up in a ball and do nothing. It is that hope that gives us the capacity to love even after we've been mistreated and abused.

And it is that hope that gives us the capacity and ability to pray and to believe in prayer.

Here in James 5, James asks, "Are any among you suffering? They should pray."

Okay. Well, yeah, when we all suffer, I think we'd all agree it's a good idea to pray. But James holds up Elijah as an example of the belief in prayer that is tied to hope.

"Elijah was a human being like us," James wrote. "And he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six

months it did not rain on the earth. Then, he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain and the earth yielded its harvest.”

For three years and six months, Elijah prayed it wouldn't rain. He had hope that God would hear his prayer. And as the days, weeks, months, and years went by, the rain didn't come. And then he prayed it would rain. And one day, the rain came and produced a harvest.

Maintaining hope, maintaining the belief that the Lord is on our side, that God would answer prayer, well...there may not be a finer quality within us.

And that quality is instilled and maintained somehow by a God who is on our side when enemies are lurking. Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth.

Thanks be to God. Amen.