

## When the Faithful Sing

### Psalm 57

Season 3 Episode 3 of *The Crown* ends with the moving scene of Queen Elizabeth sitting alone listening to the hymn, *Jesus, Lover of My Soul*, with a single tear running slowly down her cheek. The Queen had trouble showing emotion, but back of the hymn and the tear was the tragedy at Aberfan, a South Wales mining village. On Friday, October 21, 1966, rain caused a mountain of sludgy waste from the mine to slide down the hill into the village below, burying the town's school. 116 children died that day in the school.<sup>i</sup>

Prince Philip went to Aberfan the day they buried 81 of the children. As the town's people gathered to lay 81 of their children to rest, they sang, *Jesus, Lover of My Soul*. The first verse of that hymn goes like this:

Jesus, lover of my soul, let me to thy bosom fly,  
While the nearer waters roll, while the tempest still is high:  
Hide me, O my Savior, hide, till the storm of life is past;  
Safe into the haven guide; O receive my soul at last.

When Philip returned to the palace, the Queen asked him, *How it was?*

Philip: *"81 children were buried today. They didn't smash things up. They didn't fight in the streets."*

Elizabeth: *"What did they do?"*

Philip: *"They sang. The whole community. It's the most astonishing thing I've ever heard."*<sup>iii</sup>

Psalm 57 is a lament that ends with singing. This is where true lament always ends for the people of God. It ends in praise. Lament is not spewing anger at God. If you are angry at God, which many people are, you, simply, need to repent. Lament, however, is the prayerful acknowledgment that things are not right. Lament exists because of the incongruence between the truth that God reigns and the suffering, injustice, and tension we experience as God's people in the world. Lament is the Christian fighting his way to praise. This is what the psalmist does in Psalm 57.

Psalm 57 is characterized by the repetition of words: *mercy, refuge, heavens, earth, my soul, steadfast, steadfast love, faithfulness, sing, awake, and glory*. The repetition of these words adds emphasis.

The psalm, also, has a number of links with Psalm 56. It's laid out pretty much the same with two identical refrains at the ends of two of the stanzas. More than that, it seems to build on the historical note of Psalm 56, advancing the story. In Psalm 56, David fled from Saul to the Philistines where he was seized by them (cf. 1Sam 21:10ff). In Psalm 57, David had escaped from the Philistines, but was still on the run from Saul, so he hid in the cave of Adullam (cf 1Sam 22:1-2). There, presumably, he composed Psalm 57.

The scene described in Scripture is moving: *David departed from there [Gath] and escaped to the cave of Adullam. And when his brothers and his father's house heard it, they went down there to him. And everyone who was in distress and everyone who was in debt, and everyone who was bitter<sup>iii</sup> in soul, gathered to him. And he became commander over them. And there were with him about four hundred men (1Sam 22:1-2).*

In Psalm 56 we saw David fight fear with the Word and faith: believing the Word and trusting God. Psalm 57 seems to have moved from fear to a set confidence in God. His circumstances have not changed much—from the Philistines to a cave—but he has moved from the fear of man to confidence in God.

God is big in Psalm 57, and the psalmist focuses on it. While there are several references that extol the reality of God, His nature and character,<sup>iv</sup> the repetition of the refrain points the central message of the psalm.<sup>v</sup> God is exalted above the heavens and his glory is over all the earth (5,11). The psalmist's hope and our hope is tied up with the ultimate exaltation of God over all He has made.

The Psalmist affirms that God rules over all (2), yet he lives in the tension of evildoers seeking to do him harm. As he works through the contradiction of those two realities, his desire is that God would so manifest his rule that he would be delivered from his enemies. His desire goes even beyond that to God fully establishing his rule over all he has made. The thought of it caused him to sing.

I want us to see in this psalm how the Lord turns lament into praise.

## 1. We must exalt God in our lament (1-5)

The psalm moves back and forth from the psalmist talking to God (1,5,7,9-11), then talking about God (2-3), and then to talking about himself and his situation (4, -6). This is the way earnest prayer goes. There is the bouncy nature of lament. It is characterized by crying out to God, instructing ourselves in the right thinking about God, rehearsing our situation to ourselves, making commitments, and then crying out more to God. It is mixed with petition, self-exhortation, testimony, self-instruction, and praise.

On the run hiding in a cave, David prayed for God to be merciful to him (1). This is the exact plea with which he began Psalm 56, only he repeats the petition in Psalm 57.

He pleads for mercy because he has taken *refuge* in God (1). Two times he affirms God as his refuge. Notice the verb tense shift. We could say it like this; *I am taking refuge in you, and I will continue to take refuge in you.* Outwardly, it looked like he was taking refuge in a cave, but more real than the cave was God as his refuge. The psalmist used the metaphor of God spreading his wings, calling for the psalmist to hide in him *while the storms of destruction pass by.*<sup>vi</sup>

The plural *storms of destruction* is used to show the intensity of the psalmist's situation. The psalmist simply needed somewhere to safely sit out the crisis.

In verse 2, the psalmist is clear about to whom he is crying out. He is the *Most High God*<sup>vii</sup> *who fulfill his purpose for me.* Even in his crisis, God was working out his plan for the psalmist's life, and nothing or no one could stop it.

In verse 3, he moves deeper still in his thinking about God. The Most High God who fulfills his purpose is also the God who *will send from heaven to save him, put to shame those who trample him, and send out his steadfast love and faithfulness.*

What we are to see is that it is inconceivable that God will not accomplish his purpose. No matter how the storms rage, they are passing because the Most High God rules absolutely. The God who rules over all things is the God who is present with us in the storms to save and to love. He will work out every minute detail of his purpose for you.

Our task is to take refuge in him until the *storms of destruction pass by*. Hunker in, hold on, don't flinch, don't quit. God will accomplish his purpose in you.

Perhaps, the first thing we think when we hear that is, but *you don't know my situation. My situation is dire*. In verse 4, the psalmist outlined the situation in which he found himself: *in the midst of lions and fiery beasts, and men whose teeth are spears and arrows and tongues are as sharp as swords*.

Consider David's life. He was minding his own business watching his father's sheep, when Samuel anointed him king, but Israel already had a king. The next thing he knew, Saul was trying to kill him. It seems that if God were going to give you a kingdom, you would just show up and take the throne. But David found himself fleeing to the Philistines, his arch enemies for refuge. When that didn't work out, he escaped to a cave.

What would his response be? *I lie down amid fiery beasts...*(4). He does not mean lie down curled up in the fetal position. The verb *lie down* suggests lying down to sleep in a relaxed way, not withstanding the dangers all around—like Jesus sleeping in the boat.

I did not see that coming, but it makes sense if God is who the psalmist says he is: the Most High God who fulfill his purpose in us, sends from heaven to save us, puts to shame our pursuers, and sends out his steadfast love and faithfulness.

With this comes the first use of the refrain: *Be exalted, O God, above the heavens! Let your glory be over all the earth!* This first appearance of the refrain is located between the psalmist's most detailed descriptions of his enemies (4,6). It is light breaking forth in darkness.<sup>viii</sup> He is not asking God to be something he is not, but simply to show himself to be who he is. *Heaven* and *earth* represent all God has made. The psalmist expresses his desire for God to be known as he is.

In texts like this, you can see where the Lord's Prayer finds its Scriptural foundation: *Thy Kingdom come, they will be done on earth as it is in heaven*. The psalmist is calling for the rule of God to be established in all of creation, evil to be vanquished, and the world set right. The chief concern for the psalmist has become the exaltation of God. When God is exalted, praise soon follows.

## **2. God must be exalted in our praise (6-11).**

Verse 6 is the hinge that turns the psalm from lament to praise in the most surprising way. The psalmist's situation is dire. His enemies *set a net, his soul was bowed down, and they dug a pit in his way*. At this point we expect the last line to state the logical conclusion of the second line: *he fell into it*. But surprisingly, he says his enemies fell into their own trap.

Most understand the psalmist to be writing in the prophetic perfect tense in the last line. In other words, he speaks of what God will do as if it has already happened. *They have fallen* contrasts with *my soul was bowed down*.

What inspired such confidence in the psalmist? Perhaps, he had walked with God long enough to know the ways of God. A perfect illustration from David's own life is when the Ziphites, men from David's own tribe, gave up his position in the wilderness of Maon to Saul. Psalm 54 commemorates that occasion. The scene is dramatic. Saul was on one side of the mountain, and David was on the other side. Saul was closing in. There was no escape. Suddenly, messengers came to Saul saying, *Hurry and come, for the Philistines have made a raid against the land* (1Sam 23:27).

You can set your watch by it; God works his justice poetically in the world. They set a net, David was bowed down, they dug a pit, they fell into it.

Future to this point in David's life would be the death of Saul. Could there be a more poignant illustration of falling into one's own trap? In a battle with Philistines, Saul took an arrow. He asked his armor-bearer to finish him off, so that he would not fall wounded into the hands of the Philistines. When his armor-bearer would not kill him, Saul drew his own sword and fell on it (1Sam 31.3-6).

At this pivotal point, the rest of the psalm is devoted to praise. The *steadfast* (7 koon) heart of the psalmist is in contrast to his foes *setting* (6 koon) a trap for him. The word translated *steadfast* in verse 7 is not to be confused with the *steadfast love* (kesed) of God in verses 3 and 10. *Steadfast love* is one word used to designate the covenant love of God. Rather the idea of verse 7 is *set* in the sense of *firm, unmoving*. The psalmist repeats that his heart is *set* on God. As surely as his enemies *set* a net in his way (6), his heart was set on God, unmoved and unwavering by the attacks of the enemy.

Knowing God will cause his enemies to fall into their own trap, led him to sing (7c). Two times David says, *I will sing* (7c, 9b). It is a telling picture to see Saul hunting David, while David is sitting in the cave writing a song.

What do people do who hope in God? They sing. Singing characterizes the people of God throughout the ages. Paul and Silas were beaten at Philippi and put in prison. About midnight they were praying and singing hymns, and the ground began to quake. Their chains fell off. The jailer fell in fear and said, *Sirs, what must I do to be saved? Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved* was the reply (Acts 16:25-31).

The gatherings of Christians have always been characterized by Word and song. There is something powerful about the gathered church singing. In moments of the most intense private prayer, Christians will often sing. It simply flows.

One of the most interesting things about Christian singing is we sing in defiance of the course of this present age. Think of this Psalm. David is hiding in a cave, hunted by his enemies, longing for better circumstances, and he sings. That is counter-intuitive; in fact, it's resistance.

Christians are often criticized for their singing: it's either too otherworldly and triumphalist; or it's too lament-y and somber. I reject those criticisms. Christians sing for joy, in sadness, of heaven, of suffering, in death, of faith, and of hope. All of it perhaps contrary to and in defiance of the way things are. On every occasion, Christians sing. We sing for good reason—our God reigns!

Three times the psalmist uses the verb *awake*: *awake my glory, awake harp and lyre, awake the dawn!* The psalmist called for the depths of his person to awake with praise. The psalmist is stirring his innermost being. In conversation with himself about the character of God, he calls for praise to come alive in him. We must stir our souls to praise with the truth of who God is, what he has done, and what he will do for us. The silence of the harp and lyre is unreasonable. Normally, the dawn awakens people, but here the psalmist will awaken the dawn with praise.

While this psalm is an individual lament, it ends in universal praise. The psalmist has asserted the universal rule of God over all he has made and applied that to his particular situation. In these final verses, he goes universal with praise. The reference to *peoples* (9a) and *nations* (9b) fits the universal reach of God's

*steadfast love and faithfulness* (10) and God's exaltation over all creation (11). Why would the psalmist sing praises among the nations? Why turn global in his focus? Because God's steadfast love is great to the heavens and his faithfulness to the clouds (10).

The power of praise in the people of God is impactful, stunning to the nations, because of the incongruity of praise from the pagan perspective. The nations would have looked at David and said, *What are you praising God for? You're in a cave!* This text is used in a number of places in the Bible,<sup>ix</sup> not the least of which is Romans 15:9 where Paul takes it as a prophecy fulfilled in Christ being preached among the nations.

### **Conclusion:**

The psalm ends again with an appeal for God to be exalted above the heavens and his glory over all the earth. In the middle of lament, the cry of the believer is for the exaltation of God (5); and in the middle of praise, the cry of the believer is for the exaltation of God (11).

---

<sup>i</sup> 144 people in all died at Aberfan.

<sup>ii</sup> *The Crown*, season 3, episode 3. The dialogue continues:

Elizabeth: "Did you weep?"

Philip: "Did I weep? I might have wept, yes. The fact is anyone who heard that hymn today would not just have wept but would've been broken into a thousand tiny pieces."

<sup>iii</sup> *Discontented*

<sup>iv</sup> He is the Most High God who fulfill his purpose (2); He is the God of steadfast love and faithfulness (3,10).

<sup>v</sup> Wilson, *NIVAC, Psalms*, 833.

<sup>vi</sup> cf. Deut 32:11; Pss 17:8;36:7; 57:1;63:7; Isa 34:15; Mt 23:37; Lk 13:34

<sup>vii</sup> The designation Most High God had rich history in OT history (cf. Gen. 14:18).

<sup>viii</sup> Wilson, 837.

<sup>ix</sup> Other instances include 2 Samuel 22:50 and Psalm 18:49.