

January 8, 2023

A MODEL FOR CASTING OUR CARES ON THE LORD

Psalm 55

(10 of 12 in a series of selected Psalms)

Don Carson tells the story of a couple he knows—Dan and Jane.¹ One night, Jane wakes up to find that Dan is pointing to his mouth, unable to speak, and scared. They head to the hospital only to find out that Dan has cancer in his brain. The doctors operate, and are able to get some of it, but not all. What's worse is that the surgery had the effect of wiping out most of Dan's memory. He can't read or write or even recognize their infant son. On the one hand, the surgery had the effect of—somehow—causing the cancer to stop growing. On the other hand, Dan's personality is different. He's frustrated, irritable, and needs someone to watch and care for him twenty-four hours a day. That goes on for three years at which time the cancer starts growing again, and Dan dies.

Perhaps those specific details are difficult for most of us to relate to, but that kind of suffering isn't. If I limit myself simply to think of some of the suffering we've seen in this congregation, we could spend the day talking about it—infertility, loss of children, loss of a spouse, Alzheimer's, auto-immune diseases. This is the world we live in. And believers aren't exempt from these sufferings. There's a teaching that is pervasive in the church worldwide that if you belong to Christ and walk in faith, then you should expect good health and riches. But that's simply unbiblical. We know that it is.

So, in this world of suffering, what are we to do in those moments when suffering comes and it's intense? Does Scripture provide us a guide for how to walk in those moments? Indeed it does. The Psalter (the book of psalms) provides us a guide for how to address the Lord in different moments and seasons of life. But the single largest category of psalms are psalms of lament—psalms written when the author is expressing his sorrow and pain in the midst of suffering. And amazingly there are at least sixty-seven lament psalms. Some scholars categorize psalms a bit differently and estimate more, but we can say at least sixty-seven of them are psalms of lament.

Now, think about that for a second. That's just shy of forty-five percent of the book of psalms are psalms of lament. If you read through the psalms, utilizing the psalm to guide your prayers for that day, nearly every other psalm would guide you in expressing your sorrow and pain to the Lord. If we were to preach straight through the psalter, nearly every other Sunday would focus us on lamenting before the Lord in our sorrow. Why would the Lord do that? I don't mean why would the Lord include lament psalms, after all, we need them. But why give us so many? I think the answer is that we need their guidance on how to approach the Lord in our sorrow, and we need to be reminded of them again and again.

¹ D. A. Carson, *How Long, O Lord?* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990), 15. Carson notes that these aren't the real names of his friends.

If you've been here for a while, you know that I don't let the calendar guide our preaching schedule. Rather, we just follow the Scripture. I trust that because the Bible is God's word and God is infinitely wise, then he knows what we need to focus on as a congregation, and so working our way through the Scripture is what guides the focus of our sermons. We look at Old Testament books and New Testament books, and make sure we cover all of them. But with so many psalms of lament, clearly the Lord is saying to us that we need to return again and again to considering what it looks like for us to lament before the Lord in our suffering. For some reason we need this consistent reminder of how to approach the Lord in our pain. And so we return to that this morning. As we look at Psalm 55 together, we will be reminded once more of what it should look like as we approach the Lord in prayer while in the midst of our suffering.

Before we look at how David responds in the midst of his suffering, however, let's set some context. David writes this psalm while being attacked by men who have made themselves his enemies. In verse 3 he mentions "the noise of the enemy" and the "oppression of the wicked," while also letting us know that their attacks are specifically against him. He says that "in anger they bear a grudge against me," meaning that it's not just that men are doing bad things, and David happens to suffer because of it (like, perhaps, an innocent bystander in war). Rather, they are targeting him and want him to suffer. They're out to get him and even harm those whom he cares for. We see from verses 9-11 that their attacks are constant. They stir up violence and strife day and night, and their sin fills the city. But what makes it worse is that the one who has launched this attack against David was a close friend.

David tells us of this painful reality, writing in verses 12-14 and 20-21, "For it is not an enemy who taunts me—then I could bear it; it is not an adversary who deals insolently with me—then I could hide from him. But it is you, a man, my equal, my companion, my familiar friend. We used to take sweet counsel together; within God's house we walk in the throng. . . . My companion stretched out his hand against his friends; he violated his covenant. His speech was smooth as butter, yet war was in his heart; his words were softer than oil, yet they were drawn swords."

David's dear friend had deceived him, letting him think he was on his side when really he was scheming to harm him. And now it's all played out, and David is crushed. It hurts when your friend intentionally harms you more than if an enemy does, and that's where David finds himself. So, this is a hurt that is to his core and was unexpected. Yet we don't know the specifics, and I think that is helpful in some ways because we need to see that Psalm 55 isn't simply helpful when we've been betrayed. It's helpful when our suffering hurts us to our core and we feel overwhelmed. So, how then does David approach the Lord in his suffering? Let me list four things. I'll start with the obvious: in our pain we must turn to the Lord.

In our pain we must turn to the Lord

I won't spend much time here because it is stating the obvious, but Psalm 55 is a prayer. David is praying. We see it in verses 1-2a: "Give ear to my prayer, O God, and hide not yourself from my plea for mercy! Attend to me, and answer me." When David asks the Lord not to hide from him,

he is simply indicating that the Lord hasn't revealed himself in the sense of addressing David's needs. His enemies are still present, etc. But David is coming to the Lord in prayer, with a plea, searching for God to answer him and show himself. David's response to his affliction is to turn to the Lord.

The Lord invites us to come to him in our suffering. Our afflictions are not intended to drive us from him as if the Lord is saying, "I would alleviate your pain, but I'm trying to get you away from me. Take a hint, won't you?" No, he's drawing us to him. And suffering can be an extremely useful tool to draw us to him. We can more easily ignore the Lord when we think all things are going well, and we don't feel our need for him. But suffering exposes that things aren't in our control and that we are helpless. So it can be used of the Lord to pull us toward him. Let's, then, make sure we do just that. Run to the Lord in prayer. See all suffering as an opportunity to run to your Heavenly Father who loves you dearly and cry out to him. But what should our prayer look like?

David sums it up by saying that we "cast [our] burden on the LORD." We see it in verses 22 as in that one verse David interrupts his prayer to give instruction to others. I think it's David's way of telling the reader of this psalm, "Do yourself what I've just done here." And so he writes, "Cast your burden on the LORD, and he will sustain you; he will never permit the righteous to be moved." David describes what he's doing here in Psalm 55 and what we should do as believers in similar times of struggle as casting our burdens on the Lord. This is the very text Peter seems to pick up when he writes in 1 Peter 5:7 telling us to cast our anxieties on the Lord because he cares for us. So, what does *that* look like? We cast our burdens on the Lord by sharing our struggles with him.

We cast our burdens on the Lord by sharing our struggles with him

I've shown how David describes what's going on to the Lord as we walked through the setting of the psalm. It's woven throughout the psalm as David shares with the Lord the detail of his betrayal and how his enemies are hounding him. But notice how he also shares how this is affecting him personally and internally. He says in verse 2b, "I am restless in my complaint and I moan." Then in verses 4-8 he adds, "My heart is in anguish within me; the terrors of death have fallen upon me. Fear and trembling come upon me, and horror overwhelms me. And I say, 'Oh, that I had wings like a dove! I would fly away and be at rest; yes, I would wander far away; I would lodge in the wilderness; I would hurry to find a shelter from the raging wind and tempest.'"

David is overwhelmed. It looks like he could die, and he feels the terror of it. He's so afraid that he's trembling. He just wishes he could run away from everything and find escape in some shelter. To say he's overwhelmed is probably an understatement. But—and this is the key—he's telling it to the Lord. Part of what it means to cast your burdens on the Lord is to unload onto the Lord all the ways that your struggles are affecting you.

The Lord doesn't encourage us not to feel, to hold it all in, or to put on a façade that suggests all is okay with us inside. Instead, he tells us to share all of how things are affecting us with him. Nor do we do that simply because it's a healthy practice not to hold everything in—as if there's simply a therapeutic benefit for us. As Peter adds to David's exhortation to cast our burdens on the Lord, we share these things with the Lord *because we know that he cares for us*. The Lord instructs us to bare our hearts before him because he cares for us, because he loves us.

As is our family tradition, on Christmas Eve we sat around and each shared three things we were thankful for in this past year, and one of the things that I was thankful for happened when we were in Salt Lake City on sabbatical, visiting with the church plant there. We'd spent a good bit of the day with the O'Days and were getting back to our room late, but the evening weather was perfect. So we went outside and sat in a circle and just started talking. My kids were sharing their joys and struggles, and I loved it. As I mentioned, that event was so enjoyable that I shared it as one of the three things I was most thankful for in the year. But it wasn't because I just love hearing people talk. It's because I was hearing the hearts of people I love dearly.

Now, I know that God is not like us. He's not a man. But when the Spirit inspired Peter to tell us why to cast our cares, burdens, or anxieties on the Lord, this is the picture he gives us. He tells us to cast our burdens on the Lord because he cares for us. He loves us like a father loves his children. Our Father delights in his children casting our burdens on him. As we unload our struggles, we're not talking to a disinterested party but to one who loves us and cares for us. So, part of casting our burdens on the Lord is simply sharing what's in us, our struggles, how we're overwhelmed, and how we'd like to be free of our affliction. That's precisely what David models for us. Make sure, then, that we share our struggles with the Lord in prayer. That's what he himself tells us to do. But also, note that we cast our burdens on the Lord by making our requests to him.

We cast our burdens on the Lord by making our requests to him

Notice throughout the psalm that David's lament isn't simply a description of what's going on nor of him simply expressing his pain and sorrow. He also specifically makes requests of the Lord. At times I remember hearing a message when I was growing up that when our prayers are filled with requests that it reflects selfishness on our part. And, indeed, if that were all our prayers were, I suppose we'd be misguided somewhat. But when I consider how the Lord instructed us to pray, it's clear that prayer at its base is that of making requests. In the model prayer that the Lord taught, after praying that God's name would be honored, all of it is requests. We ask for God's kingdom to come, for him to give us our daily needs, for him to forgive us of our sins, and for him to keep us from overwhelming temptation. And so we shouldn't be surprised to find David's prayer includes requests for God to intervene and change his situation.

We've already noted how David opens the prayer by asking God not to hide himself from David's plea for mercy—a request for God to show himself in David's situation and change it. But specifically in verses 9 and 15 David requests for his enemies to be judged. In verse 9 he prays,

“Destroy, O Lord, divide their tongues; for I see violence and strife in the city.” Then in verse 15 he prays, “Let death steal over them; let them go down to Sheol alive; for evil is in their dwelling place and in their heart.”

Now, this might be shocking to us and take us back a bit that David’s specific requests to the Lord are for his enemies to die. He asks God to destroy them and then let death steal over them. But if this is shocking, there are two things we need to understand. First, when men are acting in violence—which David acknowledges they are—then this is an appropriate prayer. I read a book this last weekend about the Nazi invasion of Poland in the run up to World War II, and it was terrible to consider the violence against humans going on in that setting. It would have been completely reasonable for a Polish believer in that day to pray that the Lord would destroy their enemies and let death steal over them. And the second thing is similar to the first: loving our neighbor requires this kind of prayer at times. If you were surrounded by Polish Jews in that day and there were some particular soldiers physically abusing them, raping the women, and killing others, your love for your neighbor could well lead to this kind of request. And so David asks for God to intervene by taking out these men working violence.

But in the broader sense, let’s consider again the nature of David asking for God to act and change his situation. Our requests may not look like David’s, but we can pray and ask God to change our situation so that our suffering is alleviated. That is a prayer that is pleasing and honoring to the Lord. He may well not change our circumstances, but it is good and God-honoring to ask God to do so. And not only is he pleased to dramatically change our situation at times, we’re even told in James 4:2 that there can be times in believers’ lives where we do not have because we do not ask. Again, prayer isn’t simply a therapeutic exercise to make us feel better; it’s the very God-ordained means that the Lord utilizes to carry out his work—the same way evangelism is the means God uses to save people and meditating on the Scripture is a means God uses for us to grow in knowledge, wisdom, and grace. So, pray, and ask. Making requests of God reflects our understanding that we are needy and he is mighty, and so it may well be our exaltation of ourselves and our own abilities that keeps us from asking of God. But we do not see that with David. He asks. He makes requests. We cast our burdens on the Lord by making requests of God in prayer. And, finally, we cast our burdens on the Lord by trusting him to give us all we need.

We cast our burdens on the Lord by trusting him to give us all we need

It can be easy to read a psalm like this one and focus on David’s struggles. I mean, when someone writes, “The terrors of death have fallen upon me . . . and horror overwhelms me,” it’s easy for that to get the headlines. But perhaps the most remarkable element of this psalm is David’s absolute trust in the Lord. Verses 1-15 (as we’ve seen) go back and forth between David’s description of what’s going on, his sharing of his struggles, and his requests to the Lord. But verse 16 begins an expression of his absolute confidence in the Lord. David writes, “But I call to God, and the LORD will save me. Evening and morning and noon I utter my complaint and moan, and he hears my voice. He redeems my soul in safety from the battle that I wage, for many are arrayed against me. God will give ear and humble them, he who is enthroned from of

old, because they do not change and do not fear God” (vv. 16-19). Then, he concludes the psalm, writing, “But you, O God, will cast them down into the pit of destruction; men of blood and treachery shall not live out half their days. But I will trust in you” (v. 23).

Note how David does this. Verse 16 expresses his confidence in what God will do—God will save him. Then, verses 17-18, express why this confidence is there—David knows that God hears him and he knows God’s character. God is the one who redeems him, God hears him, and therefore God will save him. And David doesn’t see this logic as unique to him, which is why in verse 22 he can instruct others to cast their burdens on the Lord because “he will sustain you; he will never permit the righteous to be moved.”

This is true for us as well. The Lord will never let anything come into your life but that he will sustain you through it. He has taken hold of those who are his, and (as we sing) he will hold us fast. This means that as you pray, even if God doesn’t answer your specific requests in the manner you desire, you can trust him to give you what you need to walk in godliness. He’ll sustain you. Sometimes his answer may be as it was to Paul—the Lord didn’t remove the thorn in his flesh but gave him grace. And his grace for you will be sufficient. So a key part of our lament is trusting the Lord. It’s hardly the reality that we cast our burdens on the Lord if we end our time of prayer by solely looking to ourselves as the solution. It’s like handing it over, taking a deep sigh of relief, and then picking back up on the burden and walking away. We must not do that. We trust him, and trust him to work all for our good and give us what is good for us. So much of the Christian life just comes down to trusting our Lord.

And why can we trust him? Well, we’ll remind ourselves one more time this morning why it is that we must trust our Lord. It is because when we were his enemies he loved us enough to send his Son to live, die, and be raised for us. If ever you start to waver in your trust in the Lord, just remind yourself of that glorious gospel, and let us remind ourselves of it now as we come to the table. And then let us regularly run to the Lord in our struggles, casting our cares on him, and trusting our trustworthy God. Amen.