

Out Of The Depths

Series: Patterns for Prayer

by Steve Zeisler

The term "fog of war" is one we hear more and more often as the events in the Persian Gulf unfold. It's a phenomenon that military thinkers have been aware of for a long time. As events in war accelerate and more things happen at the same time, it's difficult to keep track of what's going on. Smoke from bombs exploding obscures the scene; aggressive actions are being taken on various fronts at once; and nobody can tell exactly what's happening: the fog of war descends. Added to all that are deliberate efforts to spread misinformation and manage the news. This, too, contributes to the fog of war.

Spiritual warfare

Warfare is one of the biblical terms used to describe the Christian life. We are called to be soldiers, to "fight the good fight," as 1 Timothy 6:12 says. The warfare we are engaged in is spiritual, not physical, and the weapons of our warfare are not the weapons of this world. Our enemy is not other people or kingdoms in this world. Our enemy is Satan himself with his destructive capacity to ruin lives from the inside out, bringing about terrible choices that result in further terrible choices and the growth of unrighteousness. We are to resist this activity in our lives. But in spiritual warfare, as well as in earthly warfare, the fog of war can descend upon us. We can fight on the wrong fronts, head off in the wrong direction, and be taken in by propaganda. We can become deceived as to what our real objectives are and spend time doing things that are useless or, even worse, destructive to ourselves and our cause.

We have been studying prayer together over the last several weeks, and I submit to you that the best way for us to be clear-headed, focused in the right direction, fighting the real enemy, and using weapons that are effective, is to become men and women of serious prayer. I'm not talking about shallow prayer consisting of hollow phrases heaped on one another, but in-- depth prayer in which we speak with the Lord at length, see him clearly, listen effectively, and are moved to understand his purposes. The prayer in Psalm 143 is about spiritual warfare. This prayer will be an excellent one to help us think about how we should engage in this business of having an enemy and a Savior, of resisting the one and choosing the other. Let's read it together.

Notice that verse 1 introduces us to our defender:

**O LORD, hear my prayer,
listen to my cry for mercy;
in your faithfulness and righteousness
come to my relief.
Do not bring your servant into judgment,
for no one living is righteous before you.**

Verse 3 introduces us to our enemy--

**The enemy pursues me, he crushes me to the ground;
he makes me dwell in darkness like those long dead.
So my spirit grows faint within me; my heart within me is dismayed.**

Beginning with verse 5 we find the process that David the psalmist goes through of making the right choices to engage in the war:

**I remember the days of long ago;
I meditate on all your works and consider what your hands have done.**

**I spread out my hands to you; my soul thirsts for you like a parched land.
Answer me quickly, O Lord; my spirit fails.
Do not hide your face from me or I will be like those who go down to the pit.
Let the morning bring me word of your unfailing love, for I have put my trust in you.
Show me the way I should go, for to you I lift up my soul**

**Rescue me from my enemies, O Lord, for I hide myself in you.
Teach me to do your will, for you are my God;
may your good Spirit lead me on level ground.
For your name's sake, O Lord, preserve my life; in your righteousness, bring me out of
trouble.
In your unfailing love, silence my enemies; destroy all my foes, for I am your servant.**

We don't have any basis on which to appeal to God except our guilt and his mercy.

God's mercy

The first two verses make very clear the beginning point in any efforts on our part to uphold righteousness and oppose evil. We must first call out to the Lord for his help. He is our defender, our Savior. It is clear in the first verse that this is not an appeal by the psalmist to one of his peers to stand shoulder-- to-- shoulder with him in a fight. He is our Savior, and the plea of verse 1 is for rescue: "Come to my relief." If we were to use the Persian Gulf war as an analogy here, our role would be that of Kuwait, and his role to come to our aid. We have been overrun by problems, as the psalmist will go on to say. We find ourselves in desperate straits, unable to adequately defend ourselves. We call out to our God and Father that he would come and fight on our behalf, and that we would allow his efforts within us to grant us success.

The recognition of verse 2 is critical. Our appeal to the living God is not based on rights we have before him; we don't have him in our debt, so that we can say, "We have done so much for you, you come and act for us." We don't have any basis on which to appeal to God except his mercy. We are asking the living God to be compassionate to us. "Do not bring your servant into judgment," David says in verse 2, "for no one living is righteous before you." He is going to go on in verse 3 to say it is inappropriate of the enemy to attack, and he is going to resist that attack, but in verse 2 he recognizes that if the Lord were to stand against him he would have no basis to complain. "If you were to judge me, I would be condemned," he is saying. We cannot begin to get well if we don't begin with the recognition of verse 2. We deserve judgment and only appeal to the mercy of God for help.

I was playing golf with my father-- in-- law not too long ago, and he told me about a joke that a friend of his had played on him when they were golfing together some weeks earlier. He had hit a tee shot early in the round that went into the water. His friend looked at him seriously and said, "Gee, Fred, that's really not your fault." Inwardly he agreed, "That's right-- it was the wind, or someone spoke during my back swing. It wasn't my fault." Later he shanked an approach shot, and it went shooting over the green into a trap, and his friend said, "Boy, Fred, that's really not your fault." He began to realize that he was having his leg pulled a little bit. Another hole later he missed a two-- foot putt, and his friend said again, "Boy, that really isn't your fault, Fred." As the match continued, his friend went on saying the same thing increasingly for mistakes that clearly were his fault. No one made him miss the putt or slice the ball into the water. If you can't hit a golf ball it is your fault. Either you're not concentrating, or you're not skilled, or something. It's not anyone else's fault. There is nothing external to you that is making it happen. Whatever goes wrong for you in that setting is your responsibility.

It's the same recognition here in verse 2. "It is my fault," David is saying. It's as silly to try to excuse yourself before God when you're in trouble as it is to say that it's not your fault when your golf ball goes in the water. We have no basis to appeal to God except our guilt and his mercy. That's the starting point. So David asks his ally to come alongside him, to rescue him in his difficulty.

Dead in a tomb

Now we see the terrible devastation that the enemy can cause. This is powerful poetic imagery in verses 3 and 4: "The enemy pursues me, he crushes me to the ground; he makes me dwell in darkness like those long dead. So my spirit grows faint within me; my heart within me is dismayed." The term "dismayed" in verse 4 is a very strong one; in other places it is translated "appalled," "overwhelmed," or "my spirit is appalled within me." This is as vivid a description of what it means to be depressed as I think you can find in the Bible. What David is describing is a sense that his inner life has been overtaken by an enemy, and this has absolutely destroyed any sense of wellbeing he had. The picture he draws is of being in a grave or a tomb. The tomb is in utter darkness. He feels like a dead body, and not just a recently dead body but one that has decayed over a period of time. It is putrefying, awful to look at, awful to smell, and awful to be around. He feels that his heart and spirit have descended to the point of rotting in the darkness of a grave. It is an awful image describing a terrible depression that has descended upon him.

I got a heart-- rending call late at night a couple of years ago. There was a woman's voice on the other end, absolutely lifeless and monotone. She said, "I won't tell you my name. I am sitting in a dark room. I don't have any friends. I am going to commit suicide." She continued to talk in this lifeless tone of voice. By the grace of God it did not end in suicide, but I remember thinking, what a horrible life-- to be sitting without friends, without even a name, in a dark room, with no life left in her voice, anticipating killing herself. David feels himself the victim of something like that here.

We need to recognize that the battle he is describing is against the one he calls the enemy, not an enemy in this case. It is not one of the human beings who arrayed himself against David at various points in his life a particular general fighting him in a war, or a particular opponent in some area of his kingdom. David is seeing beyond all the human beings who at times attacked him and is recognizing that behind them is the enemy, the destroyer himself, the one Jesus said was a murderer from the beginning, a liar and the father of lies, the one who is committed to ruining everything God cares about.

Interior battle

Further, the battle is taking place mostly inside him. As terrible as it is to experience sickness, poverty, or other difficult circumstances, the worst battles we ever fight will be inside our own hearts, where we learn to hate ourselves, where temptations overwhelm us, where we learn patterns of self-- destructive, or what we have been calling dysfunctional, behavior. All of us are dysfunctional. The more clearly we think, the more we realize that all of us have within us the capacity for ruining ourselves and spreading the ruin to other people. The most vicious, powerful attacks of the enemy will begin on the inside of us, tearing up everything that is there, to the point in David's case that he experienced extreme depression. Now, I'm not saying everybody will have exactly the same emotional experience; you may not experience severe depression. But we all have interior weaknesses, and these will be the points of the most Significant attack.

Remember what Paul wrote in Romans 7: 18 -- 24 "I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do- this I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it. So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?" So we see that the antagonist is not outside but inside. That is what David is seeing here. He has lost all capacity to even hope for his own sake that he might get well again. He imagines himself a rotting corpse in a sealed tomb, emotionally dissipated, appalled .

The last point I would make in verses 3 and 4 is that the enemy he sees is an enemy who is aggressively pursuing him, who intends to crush him. We sometimes think of the Christian life as avoiding pitfalls. We walk very carefully, and if we don't make a mistake and fall into this crevice here and if we avoid that land mine over there, we can make our way through life. But David is not imagining a carefully executed life of avoiding pitfalls. There is a stampede roaring behind him. The enemy is chasing him and threatening to crush him, and no amount of careful, thoughtful organization of his life can keep such an enemy from overwhelming him. It's too big a problem, too deadly a war, too awful an enemy. So he finds himself, at least at this point in

his life, on the receiving end of the attack, and he feels overwhelmed.

Determined to remember

The question is, then, what do we do now? What happens if we've called out to God for rescue because the condition we have described is one in which the enemy seems to have vaulted into success over us? Verses 5 --12 give us a thoughtful series of steps that we can learn from as we hear David pray these things. The first step in getting free from this kind of desperation is in verse 5: "I remember the days of long ago; I meditate on all your works and consider what your hands have done." The first thing David does is deliberately take control of his mind. He deliberately begins to think of concrete actions that God has taken in the past that are irrefutably true. They happened in history; they could not be figments of anybody's imagination. Instead of bemoaning his fate, instead of letting his emotions control him, his mind awash with his anguish, he deliberately focuses his attention on remembering certain things. It's an act of the will, a teeth-gritted determination to think about what God has done with his hands.

Now, the hands of God always portray the activity of God. It's what he does, what he creates, his movement-- concrete actions. David knows the story of the Bible and can think back to Noah and the extraordinary protection of God for his family; though the storms grew and the seas rose, there was the ark protecting Noah and his family. Or he can think back to the Exodus, where God called apart the sea so that the people of Israel could pass through it, and then destroyed their enemies behind them. We, too, can think back to these acts of God as well as to others- the Babylonian captivity and how God, after 70 years of punishment, sent his people back to their land; and the empty tomb of Jesus Christ, who was crucified for our sins yet raised and glorified. We can think back to any number of times in church history when the Lord has brought people to their senses and defeated enemies before the people of God. We can think back through our own lives to times when God's hand acted on our behalf, when he did something for us, protected us in a concrete way, or met our needs.

I remember one time when I was almost in a terrible car accident. I fumed the wheel slightly for no reason that I can remember at all, veering off to the side and escaping the accident that ensued, which presumably would have been horrible, perhaps fatal. My clear perception at the time was that it wasn't I who did it; somebody else's hand, that of the Lord God himself, protected me in this circumstance. I have no other explanation for it. I think back to the birth of each of our children. I am sure that on those occasions God was present, allowing them to be born into the world, having called life into being in the first place. When I think of our children I never think of anything but the concrete activity of the hand of God giving these lives to us. They are no accident. I can review other specific times and events in my life when I know God acted, and no matter how I feel at a given moment, those memories cannot be taken away. And that's what David does. Step 1 is to remember, to make your mind attend to the truth. "I remember the days of long ago; I meditate on all your works and consider what your hands have done."

Longing in the desert

We need to recognize that step 1 is not the last step; all is not quickly made well. His memory of what God has done by itself has not made things all better: "I spread out my hands to you; my soul thirsts for you like a parched land" (v. 6) The metaphor has changed from a grave to a desert. This imagery suggests that there is more hope than there was. A desert that is longing for the rain to fall upon it has at least a modicum of hope. It's calling out for something to happen. It can imagine the rain falling. It is not healed yet; it is still parched and lifeless, but it hasn't given up hope. While a grave that is sealed shut in utter darkness is a condition of hopelessness, this has at least the possibility of hope. But it's certainly not a fulfilled life. Theology in and of itself doesn't make us well. Most often we can't just review the truth mentally and be changed instantly into people who are emotionally whole, relationally secure, and so on. It's just the first step.

If we are going to avoid the fog of war, we need to
insist on our own honesty and not pretend that things are okay when they are not

Then verse 7 begins a series of prayers in which David calls out for God to act and lays alongside each call for God's action an honest statement about himself. If we are going to avoid the fog of war, we need to insist on

our own honesty and not pretend that things are okay when they aren't okay, not try to beautify what isn't beautiful, and not lie to ourselves about who we are and what we are going through. There has to be in prayer, at least (if nowhere else), an honesty that says, "Lord, I am really hurting, uncertain, and fearful."

There is a process to this that we see beginning in verse 7: "Answer me quickly, O Lord," is the request; "my spirit fails," is the statement. He's saying, "Hurry up, please Lord! This is not the kind of thing we can do next week." Then he says, "Do not hide your face from me or I will be like those who go down to the pit." Again, David's sensation here is that he is on the very edge of something terrible, and he's calling on God to act. "Let the morning bring me word of your unfailing love," is another request, and "I have put my trust in you," is the corresponding statement. In this wrestling, this process of asking God to meet his need, he's beginning to connect who he is, the real David, with the real God. There is an upward movement in these prayers. From "answer me quickly," he has moved on to say, "Let the morning bring me word of your unfailing love." Now, he continues, "Show me the way I should go." You see there is increasing health, vitality, and a sense that there is something to live for. "Rescue me from my enemies, O Lord, for I hide myself in you." His enemies aren't always going to succeed; he has a hiding place in the Lord. "Teach me to do your will, for you are my God," he says, and finally, "may your good Spirit lead me on level ground." You can see that he has moved all the way from the tomb and its darkness to the desert, and now he is imagining terrain before him in which a pathway has been built by the good Spirit of God himself; and he expects the Lord to lead him to level ground. He can imagine a future in which life makes sense, in which he can emotionally, relationally, physically and otherwise get on with things with hope and anticipation, and he's counting on the leadership of the Spirit of God.

What has taken place is that he has reviewed who God is and what his relationship with God is in both what he asks of God and in the statements he makes about himself. As he reviews these facts he begins to exercise faith in God's willingness and power to deliver him, and the exercise of faith is what enables this movement from total darkness to experiencing life again. This can be a long process; I am not suggesting that everything that takes place between verses 7 and 10 can happen as quickly as it takes to read this psalm. It can be days, weeks, or months, but it's a process of illumination, of change, of applying the truth of God, and having health increase over a period of time.

The face of God

Before we move on, look at the imagery in these verses. He's been talking about darkness, the tomb that he found himself in, and the pit that he fears he will fall into. But he's also using language like, "Let the morning bring me word of your unfailing love." He's beginning to realize that the darkness doesn't have to last forever, that beyond the night there is a dawn. In using that language, he's expressing hope. He also talks about the face of God. I think that's very useful to notice. Previously he has described the hands of God acting. But when he thinks of the face of God, he's thinking of a relationship. He's thinking of the most intimate, personal thing about someone. When you have a face-- to-- face relationship with someone, you are seeing them for who they are, not just what they do. If you were to ask your neighbor to take his or her wallet out and show you the pictures of the people they care about, there will be pictures of their faces, not their elbows or their knees, because you record the most personal thing about them. And that's what David is beginning to pray about. This morning Kelsey and Patty sang a song that went, "In a little while we'll be with the Father, can't you see him smile?" That's talking about his face, about the longing for that day when we look at the Lord not through a glass darkly anymore, but face- to- face. You can see David beginning to pray in that kind of language now, and the images he uses are fuller, more hopeful, and freer.

The psalm ends with verses 11 and 12: "For your name's sake, O Lord, preserve my life; in your righteousness, bring me out of trouble. In your unfailing love, silence my enemies; destroy all my foes, for I am your servant." David is expecting life beyond this particular battle in the war. He is saying, "I am counting on you to act, Lord, and not just because you are merciful." He has realized through this process that something else is true: Not only is he guilty and in need of the grace of God, but he can say with equal certainty, "I am your servant." He has realized that he is in a relationship with God of which he can be just as certain as he is of his sins. God is committed to him. He doesn't deserve this relationship, but he is confident of it, certain that it exists." Therefore, when he says, "for your name's sake," he is asking God to defend his own name because in doing that he will defend his children. David is saying he knows God loves him. "In

your unfailing love, silence my enemies." But the ringing word of confidence is, "I am your servant." He's saying, "That is as true of me as anything else is. As certain as I am that I am inadequate, and as often as it is true that I feel defeated, and the enemy crushes and overwhelms me, as much as any of those things can be said of me, what I also will insist on saying about myself at the end of this process of prayer is that I belong to the Lord. I am his servant." And that is the place of resolution, the place of victory in battle.

Let's just sum all this up. It is important to know who our ally is and who our enemy is. Our ally is the living God. We speak to him not because we independently have a right to, but because we count on him to be merciful. We recognize that the enemy is vicious and that he is going to fight the war inside us as much as he's going to do anything else; the plain of battle is the heart-- the emotions, thinking, and choosing of the man or woman of God. Having undergone tremendous defeat and terrible depression, David fights his way out through a process of first remembering the concrete actions of God, and secondly, beginning to pray in honest admission of his needs, drawing alongside those honest admissions what he knows about the power of God. There is a slow step-- by-- step walking up out of the pit, and eventually we find him confidently asserting that he is God's servant. This is a clear, honest, unfogged view of spiritual warfare. It does not pretend that things are better than they are, nor does it resign itself to defeat, horror, and destruction. There is clear insight in this that is useful to all of us because we are all soldiers in the war. I commend to each of us the wisdom and learning of this prayer in Psalm 143.

"To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy-- to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore!" (Jude 24.)

Catalog No. 4244
Psalm 143
Seventh Message
Steve Zeisler
February 17, 1991

[Back to Index Page](#)

Copyright© 1996 [Discovery Publishing](#), a ministry of [Peninsula Bible Church](#). This data file is the sole property of Discovery Publishing, a ministry of Peninsula Bible Church. It may be copied only in its entirety for circulation freely without charge. All copies of this data file must contain the above copyright notice. This data file may not be copied in part, edited, revised, copied for resale or incorporated in any commercial publications, recordings, broadcasts, performances, displays or other products offered for sale, without the written permission of Discovery Publishing. Requests for permission should be made in writing and addressed to Discovery Publishing, 3505 Middlefield Rd. Palo Alto, CA. 94306-3695.