

HE DREW ME OUT OF DEEP WATERS

by Steve Zeisler

In studying this passage I was reminded of a frightening incident that occurred when I was about eight years old. The memory came rushing back with great force and clarity. My family lived in Downers Grove, Illinois outside Chicago, and during the summer I went to a day camp. As part of the day camp we traveled to a pool in Naperville where we were taught to swim. The swim instructor had turned aside for a moment, and one of the older kids at the pool grabbed me and held my head under the water. At first it was kind of a game, but then I realized he wasn't letting go, and I began to be terrified. I was thrashing and trying to break the grip that was holding me under, and I couldn't. I distinctly remember the terror I felt.

I've talked to some other people about life-threatening experiences in water. A number of folks were able to remember situations in which drowning seemed likely, and it was very frightening. The threat of drowning is a good metaphor for all things frightening and overwhelming. We feel the force of it powerfully.

Psalm 18:4 describes a life that is being lost by drowning in a torrent of water. This psalm has some of the most vivid imagery that you'll find in the poetry of the Bible. We'll do well to use our imaginations to see and feel ourselves in the circumstances being spoken of here.

Recall our study of verses 1-3. We considered the imagery of a fortress, a high, rocky place that was impregnable. The fortress was sunk deep in the bedrock, and nothing could harm the person secure there. Being able to picture such a fortress helped us hear what David was saying:

"I love you, O Lord, my strength.

The Lord is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer;
my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge.

He is my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold.

I call to the Lord, who is worthy of praise,
and I am saved from my enemies."

Drowning on the inside

Now we come to the second of the great images of this psalm in verses 4-6:

The cords of death entangled me;
the torrents of destruction overwhelmed me.

The cords of the grave coiled around me;
the snares of death confronted me.

In my distress I called to the Lord;
I cried to my God for help.

From his temple he heard my voice;
my cry came before him, into his ears.

We're going to skip to verse 16 here. In the intervening verses David tells of the great savior who comes to the rescue. That's the subject we'll take up in the next message. But in verses 16-19 David finishes the description of the near-drowning experience:

He reached down from on high and took hold of me;
he drew me out of deep waters.

He rescued me from my powerful enemy,
from my foes, who were too strong for me.

They confronted me in the day of my disaster,
but the Lord was my support.

He brought me out into a spacious place;
he rescued me because he delighted in me.

There's an interesting Hebrew word in verse 4: *nachal*, which means a wadi or a water course. David is recalling his days in the desert when he ran from the attacks of King Saul. When he was in the desert God secured him in a fortress. But there David also saw the flash floods that take place during the rainy season. Usually these water courses are dry, sandy places. But a few times a year, it rains hard, and because the ground is rocky and doesn't absorb water very well, the water rushes to low places. There are narrow passages between the contours of land and the rocks, and these ravines become the sites of the flash floods. That's what David is describing here. He is describing being constricted in one of these narrow ravines. He can't run and he can't swim, and a wall of water is bearing down on him.

The picture being drawn here describes the inability to save yourself in the face of awful circumstances. And these awful circumstances are not about merely getting bruised or sidetracked for a short time. They are about life and death: "The cords of death entangled me; the torrents of destruction overwhelmed me." The word translated destruction is *beliya'al*, which is the New Testament name Belial used of the devil. The destroyer himself is in the valley as the torrent is about to sweep away David's life. He speaks of the grave: "The cords of the grave coiled around me; the snares of death confronted me."

In verse 17 David makes reference to a "powerful enemy" and "my foes," (the ones who hate him). Someone is behind all of this destruction, doing hateful things. Is he writing primarily about circumstances in which he is physically endangered?

Not likely. Rather, these verses concern inner life issues, tragedies of the soul and heart. They are about times when you feel like you're drowning on the inside, when you are scared to death of what you discover about yourself inwardly. The psalms are generally about the inner life, about spiritual things. This isn't a pamphlet on desert living. It's using imagery from the desert to talk about how to live with your own heart.

In addition, from the history given to us in the Bible, we know that David was rarely frightened by human foes and physical danger. He did fine with external enemies. Recall his description of Goliath: "Who is this uncircumcised Philistine challenging the armies of the living God?" When his life was physically threatened, he seemed supremely confident. He wasn't afraid when he lived among the Philistines, when he had to fight against them, even when his own son raised an army to attack him.

David's experiences of fear and hopelessness had to do with the condition of his spirit. It was moral failure, a sense of alienation from God, those times when he had ruined his life inwardly that led him to use the imagery of a flash flood.

Feeling unforgiven, worthless, rejected

Other passages from David's psalms make this clear. The desperation figured by the flash flood is desperation that is caused by guilt that is unforgiven, by hopelessness, by defilement, by futility. Consider Psalm 143:3-4:

"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."

Most of us have had experience with temptations, pressures, sinful activity that rises up within us and pursues us though we hate it. We have characteristic weaknesses, don't we? Someone has coined the phrase, "binge sinning." We fight off the pressure or temptation for awhile, but eventually it seems too strong, and like an enemy pursuing us, it captures us and crushes us. That's what David is describing in Psalm 143. It could be food addiction, alcohol, pornography, drugs, or a vicious temper. It is held in check for awhile, but finally it explodes and ruins things. Early on we insist, "That will never happen again. This time I will deal with it." But you do it again and again. You look back over your life, and the longer you live, the more you realize, "I am vulnerable. I cannot stop. This enemy has the power to come back and destroy me and leave me as if lifeless in a grave. The only conclusion I can draw about myself is that I am weak and worthless. People who have problems like this don't deserve the love of God or the companionship of good people. People like me don't deserve anything." That kind of attack, when you're drawing such awful conclusions about yourself, is like drowning. There is no place to go, and you can't save yourself.

Listen to Psalm 31:9-10, also by David:

"....I am in distress;
my eyes grow weak with sorrow,
my soul and my body with grief.

My life is consumed by anguish
and my years by groaning;
my strength fails because of my affliction,

and my bones grow weak [like melted wax]."

He hates everything about himself--his eyes, his body, his bones. He's describing a self-hatred that too many Christians are well acquainted with. There are not only these weaknesses that overtake us, but some live with a lasting sense of defilement. Maybe you were abused or mistreated by authority figures when you were young. Maybe someone managed to penetrate your heart and do such chaotic and ruinous things that you cannot believe you have any value. If anybody really knew the real weakness and decay in there, they would never come near you or have anything to do with you. At times you can make the feelings go away and go on with life, but then the wall of water comes back, and there's no way out.

Nobody ever wrote more profoundly about what it means to be beaten up inside, about tragic spiritual experience and soul sickness, than David, although he was a great king, and among the most gifted human beings, who ever lived. Look at the next two verses in Psalm 31, verses 11-12:

"Because of all my enemies,
I am the utter contempt of my neighbors;

I am a dread to my friends---
those who see me on the street flee from me.

I am forgotten by them as though I were dead;
I have become like broken pottery."

Failure leads to rejection. "Relationships always come apart," says the heart that's beginning to drown in loneliness. "Marriages, friendships, and friends fail. People who once loved me have drifted away. Nobody cares." It's feeling like a worthless, broken piece of pottery that is kicked aside and left in the dust. Such thinking becomes a flood, "Not only am I lonely and alone, but this is going to go on forever. No one will

ever care for me. I'm the kind of person who deserves to be alone and unloved."

David observes that the torrent is coming too fast and the water is too high. What he needs is to get out of the canyon into a broad place where the water doesn't overwhelm him. That's what verse 19 offers.

"He brought me out into a spacious place;
he rescued me because he delighted in me."

He was in a narrow canyon, trapped by cords and snares, drowning in torrents of water, but God, his rescuer, brought him out to a spacious place where the water spread out and didn't overwhelm him, where his head wasn't dragged under, where he could breathe again.

Focus on the rescue will come in later messages. Our goal here is to do justice to the articulation of the problem---facing a flash flood---that is presented here.

We can benefit by a look at the superscript of this psalm, the introduction before verse 1. This is not a part of the poem as it was written; an ancient editor added it. Many of these psalms have superscriptions. This one says, "For the director of music. Of David the servant of the Lord. He sang to the Lord the words of this song when the Lord delivered him from the hand of all his enemies and from the hand of Saul." I mentioned in the last message that this poem is found in both the psalter and at the end of 2 Samuel. The writer of 2 Samuel wanted to include one of David's psalms as he wrapped up the story of his life, and he chose this one. We're told here that this was written after David had been delivered from all his enemies, so it was written late in his life, after he had fought a lot of battles, dealt with many problems, learned lessons. But highlighted among all his enemies---Goliath, the Philistine armies, Absalom, Abner, and others---is Saul. Why Saul?

Consider also that between verses 3 and 4 there is no transition. We hear a declaration of how safe it is to be in the fortress of God, and then with no warning all seems to be lost. Why are those two ideas given to us in such rapid succession, without any attempt to distance them or explain the connection?

Not like Saul

There is a reason that Saul failed as king. Saul's physical presence was impressive, even in his own eyes. Saul had been anointed king by Samuel and he assumed that because he was king, he ought to be able to handle everything that life threw at him. Saul was not able to go to the living God when life got hard. He didn't know how to articulate the inner sorrows, how to admit that he was weak and scared. The thing that made David a great man of God is that he was able, from the beginning to the end of his life, to say, "Lord, I am drowning. I am in over my head. I have no answers. Help me!"

The superscription highlights Saul among all of David's enemies because David had to decide, in the years when he was waiting to ascend the throne, whether he would be a king like Saul. Does the work of God in choosing and establishing us ever put us beyond the need for him to intervene as rescuer? David refused to be impressed with his own royalty as Saul had been.

It's important to be able to say to God that we need help again and again. It's important to be able to say that to one another. We cannot think that declaring God is our Rock cancels that out. We don't always have to be successful, unafraid. To admit that we are overwhelmed is not a denial of the sure foundation for life we have in the Lord.

Christianity becomes attractive when believers can admit times when it seems very dark and the water is rushing in. Most people reject Christian churches because they think we believe that we've joined the club, we've become superior beings; they're all messed up and we're not. They accuse us of claiming some kind of spiritual royalty that we've achieved on our own and we sustain on our own.

David says in quick succession that he is certain beyond a shadow of a doubt that there is a Rock in a chaotic world, a Fortress that is secure; and that he is in desperate circumstances, and he cannot save himself. Jesus is called the son of David because of David's intense awareness of his need for God, his willingness time after

time in failure to turn to God for help, to be renewed, to be set back on his feet. "I need Thee every hour," the old hymn goes. It's that kind of clinging to the Lord and honesty about his needs that made David the great figure. That's why Saul is a failure and David is a hero.

The section of Scripture that has been at the heart of our church over its fifty-year history is found in 2 Corinthians 2-6. Ray Stedman's book *Authentic Christianity* was written about this passage. It's been translated into many different languages because of its compelling, life-changing power. Paul tells of real Christianity, in which we are perplexed, frightened, desperate (drowning, to use David's metaphor in Psalm 18). Genuine Christianity does not mean strengthening ourselves so we don't have problems, or denying we have problems and hoping they'll go away. It means believing that worthless, cracked, earthen pots contain a great treasure. It means believing that there is a power that works in weakness, that is made strong when we have nothing to offer. This is at the heart of what it means to be a Christian. Second Corinthians 4:7-11: "But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may be revealed in our mortal body."

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