

God Is My Helper

Psalm 54

I'm going to take a little bit of a different approach to preaching this Psalm. Since this Psalm is rooted in a specific historical context, we are going to study that context in detail and then interpret the Psalm in that light.

This past week, I sent out a few links to articles that talk about living by prayer. One was about Elisabeth Elliot, a woman who suffered a great deal – and yet had a powerful, vibrant Christian life. How did she do it? One of the keys was learning to live by prayer. Learning to live by prayer is different than learning how to pray. Most of us know how to pray. We've prayed many times. But most of us struggle to live by prayer. In other words, most of us, in the hustle and bustle of daily life, live by our resources, abilities, instincts, intellect, and desires. They are what we look to as we do our life.

I've noticed something about myself. I say "I'm tired" a lot. The problem with that statement is not that it isn't true. The problem is that I state it as though it were a definitive reality – as though my day depends on my strength. But that isn't true. If God shows his strength in my weakness, if God is my helper, as we read in this Psalm, then my weariness isn't the definitive reality – his power and strength are! I just need to rely and rest on it. That's what living by prayer looks like. It is taking the reality of God to be the dominant reality of my life.

You can apply that to any aspect of life: being lonely, sad, confused, hurt, or overwhelmed. We feel these things deeply – and they are true. But what if we learned to live not by how we feel about ourselves, but by what we know to be true about our God? What if we lived by faith and prayer, not by how we feel? Think of the peace and boldness and joy that could be ours. That's what David learned in 1 Samuel 23 and wishes to teach us in Psalm 54.

In 1 Samuel 23 David is on the run from King Saul. We see the heart of David when he hears a report that the Philistines are attacking Keilah, one of the cities of Judah, David's tribe. Now David had no obligation to help them. It was the job of the king to protect the land, and David was not the king. Saul was. But Saul was busy attacking David and those who stood with him. Saul was an anti-king. David had just received news that King Saul had ordered Ahimelech, the high priest, to be killed, along with his whole family and the city of Nob where the high priest lived. Saul was a desperately wicked man.

So why does David feel the need to rescue the city of Keilah? Because David has a shepherd's heart. These are God's people and they are without a shepherd. But notice what he does – he inquires of the Lord. That's noteworthy because we **don't** read of David inquiring of the Lord when he went to Nob and asked the High Priest for help. But David has learned a lesson. He was devastated to discover that his action had caused such devastation on that city, and so he proceeds this time with prayer.

1 Sam. 23:2 *Therefore David inquired of the Lord, "Shall I go and attack these Philistines?" And the Lord said to David, "Go and attack the Philistines and save Keilah."*

David's men thought he had lost his mind. It looked like a death trap. But David leads them with prayer. He hears their concerns, and then takes it to the Lord and asks again:

1 Sam. 23:4 *Then David inquired of the LORD again. And the LORD answered him, "Arise, go down to Keilah, for I will give the Philistines into your hand."*

This is living by prayer! And so David and his men go, and God gives them the victory precisely as he had promised. Now I understand that the Lord doesn't usually respond to our prayers in the exact same manner. If we ask, "Shall I buy this house? Shall I take this job?" – we don't expect an audible response. And yet, we are commanded to pray for all these things, and we can have full confidence that as we do not "lean on [our] own understanding, but in all [our] ways acknowledge him, he will make straight [our] paths" (Prov. 3:5-6). The apostle John encourages us to pray with incredible confidence:

1 John 5:14–15 *And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us. And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests that we have asked of him.*

In stark contrast to David's active, praying, faith, Saul lives by wicked presumption. Notice, when Saul hears that David has gone to rescue Keilah, he doesn't ask anything of the Lord; he simply assumes that this is evidence of God's favor.

1 Sam. 23:7 *Now it was told Saul that David had come to Keilah. And Saul said, "God has given him into my hand, for he has shut himself in by entering a town that has gates and bars."*

While David lived by prayer and acted by faith in God's word and God's promise, Saul lived by instinct and presumption. If things went his way, he assumed that was evidence of God's blessing.

The spirit of Saul is alive and well today, isn't it? There are many people who think the Lord is pleased with them because they are materially blessed. Conversely, those who have

experienced many trials can easily assume that they must have done something to upset God, to make him angry with them. That's living by presumption, not by faith or prayer.

As the story unfolds, David continues to rely upon the Lord.

Will Saul come down? Yes, he will come down (v. 11).

Will the men of Keilah surrender me into his hand? Yes, they will surrender you (v. 12).

Now, there is something going on in chapter 23 that we could easily miss, but it is an essential part of the story. If you noticed, there is a repeated theme of "hands."

23:4 – God told David, "Go and attack the Philistines and I will give them into your hand."

23:7 – Saul wickedly assumes that God has given David into his hand.

23:11 – David asks if the men of Keilah will betray him into the hand of Saul.

23:14 – Saul looked for David every day, but God did not surrender David into his hand.

We see the same word in verses 16, 17, and 20.

The issue of the text is this: whose hands are directing the course of things? The Philistines? King Saul? David? No, the hands that are directing the events of David's life are not human but divine. That's what it means to have God as your helper – it means that God is in control! He isn't a "help" like the butler, there to serve you if there is a need. He is the sovereign ruler over every atom in the universe, directing all things according to the purpose of his will. So, if **God** is your HELPER – you are perfectly safe!

But that doesn't mean life is easy. David and his men leave Keilah and take refuge in the hills of Ziph. David likely felt safe there not only because of the many places to hide but also because the locals were fellow members of the tribe of Judah. They were "his people." But, once again, just like in Keilah, David is betrayed by his own countrymen. They went to Saul and told him where David was hiding. They betrayed him.

Think of how alienated David must have felt. He rescued the town of Keilah and they were *preparing* to betray him. He hid among the people of Ziph, his countrymen, and they *DID* betray him.

President Harry Truman, reflecting on the fickleness of Washington D.C. once said, "If you want a friend in Washington, get a dog."

The men of Ziph knew that David had been anointed as king by the godly old Samuel. But they also knew what happened to the citizens of Nob. Saul was the current king and Saul was ruthless. Why risk his wrath? So, rather than protecting David and casting their lot with God's anointed, they betrayed him and cast their lot with God's enemy.

It reminds me of what John says about Jesus in **John 2:24**. John says that many people believed in Jesus when they saw the signs he was doing:

But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people ... he himself knew what was in man.

But once again, David found the Lord to be his helper. In a dramatic scene, we find Saul moving in to capture David. He has the area surrounded. David is trapped. David has 600 men. Saul has the entire army of Israel at his disposal. But we read,

1 Sam. 23:26-28 *Saul went on one side of the mountain, and David and his men on the other side of the mountain. And David was hurrying to get away from Saul. As Saul and his men were closing in on David and his men to capture them, a messenger came to Saul, saying, "Hurry and come, for the Philistines have made a raid against the land." So Saul returned from pursuing after David and went against the Philistines. Therefore that place was called the Rock of Escape.*

Isn't that a great story! Think of that. Weeks before this happened God moved someone in the Philistine army to think, *We ought to look for an opportunity to attack Israel when Saul and his army are away doing something else.* And when they heard that Saul was off chasing David, they were ready to move. God had perfectly ordained the events of Philistine affairs to rescue David exactly when he needed it.

This is the context for Psalm 54. It is a tremendous example of how to live by prayer.

1. Turn to the Lord

Psalm 54:1 *O God, save me by your name, and vindicate me by your might.*

David leans upon the unchanging faithfulness and omnipotent power of God.

"Save me by your name" – save me by all that you are and have promised.

"Vindicate me by your might" – leaning on the power of God.

Biblical prayer is much more than casting up petitions to a deity – every pagan religion does that. Biblical prayer is calling on, appealing to, leaning on, standing upon the name of God. It is laying hold of the reality of God in all is being and his word.

It is so important when we pray to not only consider our needs, but to specifically consider the God to whom we pray. What specific attributes of God can we appeal to, and lean on, in our prayer? What specific promises has he made that we can lay hold of as we come in prayer?

2. Present the Problem

Secondly, he presents his need. It's very short.

Psalm 54:3 For strangers have risen against me; ruthless men seek my life; they do not set God before themselves.

I'm not sure why the ESV translated the first word as "strangers." A better translation would be "insolent" or "arrogant." The point is that the men who seek David's life have no concern for him or for his God. There is no reasoning with them. They are wicked and dangerous. And that's all that needs to be said.

God knows the issue already – before David has even mentioned it. And so David presents the issue and then moves on to professing his faith.

3. Profession of Faith

Psalm 54:4 Behold, God is my helper; the Lord is the upholder of my life.

This is the central truth of the Psalm. This is what David wants to communicate to the people of God. God is our helper. The possessive pronoun is important. God is not merely "a" helper. Faith says, "God is MY helper." Faith says, "The Lord is the upholder of MY life."

That makes a big difference – it's the difference between living faith and functioning unbelief. There is no hope or help in an intellectual conception of God without a believing grasp of him. True faith links knowledge with trust: God is mighty in his being + God will act on my behalf.

Psalm 54:5 He will return the evil to my enemies; in your faithfulness put an end to them.

You see, God had made a promise to David. That's why David appeals to God's faithfulness. God had chosen and anointed David, and promised that he would be the king. And David casts himself upon the faithfulness of the God-who-had-promised.

That's living by faith and prayer. And that frees us to leave our "problem" in the hands of God. God will take care of it. We are free to give thanks for God's deliverance even before it comes!

4. Thanksgiving

*Psalm 54:6 With a freewill offering I will sacrifice to you;
I will give thanks to your name, O LORD, for it is good.*

A freewill offering is simply an offering that is not connected to a vow. This is a spontaneous offering given to the Lord as a sacrifice of praise. It would typically involve a community and a celebration. David most likely invited his 600 men, the company of believers that was with him, to celebrate the Lord's goodness to him. There would be food and singing and dancing, and then David would tell the story of his deliverance.

*Psalm 54:7 For he has delivered me from every trouble,
and my eye has looked in triumph on my enemies.*

This psalm fits wonderfully with the truths we've been learning in the book of Revelation. We, like David, are faced with real enemies: the world, the Devil, and our own flesh. But God is our helper. He has already, in Christ, delivered us from every eternal trouble. We can look in triumph on our defeated enemies – sins, death, and hell. He has already delivered us from the power of the grave. We are already more than conquerors through him who loved us.

And so, as Paul says in **Romans 12:12**,

Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer.

Philippians 4:5–7:

The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Let's live by prayer. Amen.