



Caring for Souls

Psalm 142

David Sunday

September 27, 2015

After spending several hours with the grieving Campbell family yesterday, it seemed to me that what I had been preparing to preach today would be better for another date, and that we would be helped as a congregation by turning to Psalm 142. This will help prepare us to engage in that noble vocation to which God has called His church—to bear one another’s burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ (Galatians 6:2) and to weep with those who weep (Romans 12:15).

These things do not come naturally to us. By nature, we are inverted, isolated and independent. However, through the Holy Spirit, God creates a fellowship. He knits our hearts together in love. He makes us one in Christ and we feel the burdens and pains of the church body. We rally together and help one another look to Jesus in our time of need. You, as a church, have been richly graced and enabled at many times and in many ways to show that love and care to each other. I know that God is going to revive us afresh in these days to continue being a caring, loving church family.

Let’s read this psalm together and specifically ask the Lord to prepare us to minister to Joey, Dan and Suzzi, as well as many who will visit our church in the days ahead and many we will encounter who need the hope of the gospel. Psalm 142 is a maskil of David after he had been anointed king, but before he had ascended to the throne. He was chased by King Saul, pursued and persecuted. He found himself hiding in a cave in Adullam. He offered this, his heartfelt prayer to the Lord, from that cave:

*With my voice I cry out to the LORD;
with my voice I plead for mercy to the LORD.
I pour out my complaint before him;
I tell my trouble before him.*

*When my spirit faints within me,
you know my way!
In the path where I walk
they have hidden a trap for me.
Look to the right and see:
there is none who takes notice of me;
no refuge remains to me;
no one cares for my soul.*

*I cry to you, O LORD;
I say, "You are my refuge,
my portion in the land of the living."
Attend to my cry,
for I am brought very low!
Deliver me from my persecutors,
for they are too strong for me!
Bring me out of prison,
that I may give thanks to your name!
The righteous will surround me,
for you will deal bountifully with me.*

Let's pray.

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing in Your sight, O Lord, our Rock and Redeemer. We ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

Brother Andrew, the Bible smuggler, was once preaching in Sri Lanka when he asked the congregation, "What is the saddest verse in the Bible?" He proceeded to answer, "The saddest verse in the Bible is Psalm 142:4: '*...no one cares for my soul.*'" Brother Andrew said that when that verse first arrested his attention, he wrote in the margin of his Bible what I wrote in the margin of my Bible when this story arrested my attention back in June 2009. He wrote, "I don't want to be 'no one.'"

I don't want to be among that great lot of people who do not care for the souls of others. I don't want to be the kind of person who, when others see me, think, "He doesn't care for me. He is not attentive to me." I don't want to be "no one." There are few greater ambitions for a Christian than to have the people in your life be able to genuinely say, "That person really cares for my soul. That person points me to the One Who bore our sorrows; Who carried our griefs; Who has a fellow sympathy with us in all our afflictions; Who weeps with those who weep. That Person cares for my soul.

May the Lord work in such a way that New Covenant Bible Church will be filled with people like this—people who know how to care for other souls. This verse applies to all of us in two ways.

First, some of us right now—and all of us at some point in our lives—wonder who cares. "Who cares for me? Who really knows what I am going through? Who really cares?"

For some, the pain of loneliness and isolation will be more acute than for others. However, I hardly think you can live a fully human life without feeling desolate and alone at times, as if no one cares and no refuge remains. "No one knows what I am going through"

Second, I think all of us right now know someone who is feeling, “No one cares for my soul.” You may not know that they are feeling that, but every single one of us knows someone right now who is feeling, “No one cares for my soul.” I think Brother Andrew’s resolve is admirable: “I don’t want to be ‘no one.’” I want to live in such a way that those who know me feel that I care for them. I want our church to be a community that cares for one another, a place of refuge for hurting people who find, perhaps for the first time, “Someone cares for me here.”

This afternoon, the care group leaders will meet for prayer and strategy. One of the things we will ask the care group leaders to pray about is to be thinking of a way in which their care groups can reach out into the community. I heard last week that one of our care groups is doing that already. There is an older couple living in a multi-home unit who said there is someone living in their condominium association whom they believe has never been visited by anyone for years. She lives all alone, never visited by anyone. Their care group is going to think of ways they can show this woman they care for her soul. May this grip each of our hearts.

David was in a cave when he wrote these words. He had previously conquered Goliath, as well as enjoyed the warm friendship of Jonathan and the marital love of Michel. He was a great success in all that he did. People knew him, loved him and admired him as a champion. But here he was forced to flee from King Saul, who sought his life. David had to bid farewell to Jonathan. Michel was no longer there at his side and it was not long before she began to despise her husband. David fled to Nob and then to Gath. There he was forced to feign insanity.

In 1 Samuel 22, we find him in this cave of Adullam. He was not literally alone there because we read this is 1 Samuel 22:2: *“And everyone who was in distress, and everyone who was in debt, and everyone who was bitter in soul, gathered to him. And he became commander over them. And there were with him about four hundred men.”*

That is whom you want with you when you are feeling all alone, right? “Send me those who are in debt. Send me those who are bitter in soul. Send me everyone who is in distress. They’ll be my friends.” That is whom David had for companions.

What could he do in this miserable cave, surrounded by unsavory companions? He went to the Rock of his salvation (2 Samuel 22:3; Psalm 18:2). He went to the Stone that the builders rejected (Psalm 118:22). He ran to the mountain, and the mountain stood by him. When the earth all around was sinking sand, he ran to the solid rock when he needed shelter. When he needed a friend, he went to the Rock. He prayed. He cried out to the Lord.

Someone has written, “There can be no situation so distressing, so perilous, so disgraceful in which faith will not derive comfort from God by fervent prayer.” But it’s easier to talk about

praying than it is to really pray, isn't it? It is easier to tell someone you will pray for them than it is to really intercede for the soul of someone else—really cry out to God on their behalf.

David was not just mentally thinking about praying. We see an urgency in his plea here. He said, "*With my voice I cry out to the Lord.*" Do you ever do that? Do you ever cry aloud to God, pouring out your grief and sorrow to Him? There are people all around the world and in your life right now who are doing that. There are people who need that right now. They need to cry out to God and know that He hears and that the heavens are not brass. He is near to the brokenhearted (Psalm 34:18). He hears when we cry to Him. David cried out with humility and fervency, pleading for mercy to the Lord. Sometimes, all we can pray is, "Lord, have mercy."

It is like blind Bartimaeus (Mark 10:46-52) on the roadside, hearing the crowd say, "The Messiah is coming." He cried, "O, Son of David, have mercy on me!" The crowds try to silence him, but he cries out louder, "Son of David, have mercy on me. You are my only help. You are my only hope." King David did not go into silence or put up a wall of self-protection.

Charles Spurgeon writes, "It was such a cry of anguish that David remembers it long after and makes a record of it. It is well when our supplications are such that we find pleasure in looking back upon them. He that is cheered by the memory of his prayers will pray again." Can you think back to a time when you really cried out to the Lord and He heard you, delivered you, was near to you?

It has been said that praying men pray better as they proceed. We find that in verse two, as David continued, saying, "*I pour out my complaint before him.*" The word there for "complaint" isn't as negative as we think of the word. It means, "I pour out my troubled thoughts—that which is deeply occupying my mind. I don't hold any of it in. I am giving it all over to God. I tell it before Him."

Then, in verse three, there is a contrast. It opens with a Hebrew adversative, a form of speech that declares what is going to be said next is not what you would expect. Instead of David sinking deeper and deeper into despair, surrendering to his circumstances and concluding that his situation is hopeless, he says, "But this is true: *When my spirit faints within me...*" Do you ever feel that fainting spirit because you have been crushed and leveled to the ground? Fires of unexpected sorrow made you faint. "But," David said (and here is where the accent lies in verse three), "*You know my way!*" "I am fainting. I am lost. There are traps all around. There is trouble everywhere, but You know how to navigate this minefield. You know how to carry me through safely. You have not forgotten me. You have not left me alone. You know my way."

That's the first summit in this psalm. We have no idea what kind of snares the enemy has set for our feet, but the Lord knows all mysteries, fathoms all depths, knows every part and

controls every situation. Nothing catches Him by surprise. He knows our way. David was out of energy, but he knew that the Lord had not forgotten him.

Look at verse four: *“Look to the right...”* “Where is my right-hand man? What has happened? No one takes notice of me. No refuge remains for me. No one cares for my soul.”

Spurgeon said, “He had known many, but none would know him. It is better to be opposed by foes than to be forsaken by friends.” It’s not that they did not know David; it’s that they ignored David. Refuge refused him. He could not turn anywhere.

Other refuge have I none, hangs my helpless soul on Thee;
Leave, ah! leave me not alone, still support and comfort me...

Thou, O Christ, art all I want, more than all in Thee I find;
Raise the fallen, cheer the faint, heal the sick, and lead the blind.

(Jesus, Lover of My Soul by Charles Wesley, 1740)

That was where David found himself. Looking out, it was hopeless. However, looking up, he was full of hope.

That brings us to the second summit. Verse five says, *“I cry to you, O LORD; I say, ‘You are my refuge, my portion in the land of the living.’”* This is the order in which it must always go. First, you have to go to God and find refuge in Him. When you do, you find Him to be your portion and your satisfaction. You will never taste the portion and satisfaction if you do not go to the refuge. If you try to self-medicate, help yourself through your grief, hold it all in, refuse to run to Him for refuge and turn to His Word as if it is your life, you won’t find the portion that is there. However, when you go to the refuge, you find that He Who abides there in that refuge is all you need. He is your portion in the land of the living. Run to His Word, desperately ravished in hunger Him!

The less comfort we find in the creature, the more we need to look to the Creator and the Redeemer. That is why David cried out to Him. Human help often fails when it is most needed. I’m sorry that this is the case, but it is true. Human help often fails when it is most needed. Human friends fail but may we be the exception here. God does not fail. Divine help is most given when it is most needed. God is the Helper of the helpless. He waits on high to have mercy on us. His help is given when it is most needed. He is a refuge and portion when all others fail. We may have many friends in prosperity, but sometimes only one in adversity. We must run to Him.

I must tell Jesus all of my trials;
I cannot bear these burdens alone;
In my distress He kindly will help me;
He ever loves and cares for His own...

Tempted and tried I need a great Savior,
One Who can help my burdens to bear;
I must tell Jesus, I must tell Jesus;
He all my cares and sorrows will share,

I must tell Jesus!
I must tell Jesus!
I cannot bear my burdens alone;
I must tell Jesus!
I must tell Jesus!
Jesus can help me, Jesus alone.

(I Must Tell Jesus by Elisha Albright Hoffman, 1894)

David does just that. He says in verse six, *“Attend to my cry, for I am brought very low. Deliver me from my persecutors, for they are too strong for me. Bring me out of prison...”* Here is the final summit. He looks forward to a time in the future when he will be surrounded by a righteous congregation and give thanks to the name of the Lord, because the Lord has dealt bountifully with him. He looked forward in hope to his healing, when he will no longer be shunned or hunted, but thronged by God’s people, rejoicing for what God has done for His servant.

Here is the thing about God’s people: we love to rejoice when things are going well, but sometimes we hide when things are not. Sometimes God’s people experience what David did in verse four. No one cared. May we not be a church that only surrounds those with whom God is dealing bountifully. May we also be a church that surrounds and bears up, sustaining those who are on the long road of suffering.

When one member suffers, may all in the body suffer with them. Each part of the body should have equal concern for each other, Paul said in 1 Corinthians 12:25. Let the words that we speak about the hurting of other believers be motivated by sincere concern for their welfare and a desire to see the Spirit work restoration in their grieving hearts. May we be assertive, attentive and affectionate in our care for each other because that is Who our Savior is.

How do we practically do this in a situation similar to what we are facing as a church right now? I have been a parent for a while now. I know what it is like to feel grief as a parent, but I do not know what it is like to lose a child. I have never had to walk in those shoes. I fear having to walk in those shoes.

I want to read for you something that I clipped three years ago, thinking that a day would probably come in the life of our church when these would be just the right words for us to hear. It is a little longer than I would normally read, but I trust that you will see the value in these words from Jill Sullivan, a mother who lost her oldest daughter in February 2009 after a battle with brain cancer. Listen to how she writes. Take to heart these wise and tenderhearted words.

May the Spirit use them to prepare us to walk as a body with those who grieve and mourn. Some are in our midst right now; others will be in the future. Listen to what this mother writes:

I'll be the first to admit it. They scared me. I mean they really scared me. I would see them coming down the hall at church, and I'd duck into the restroom or suddenly "remember" something I'd forgotten in my Sunday School classroom. If unavoidable circumstances brought us face to face, my tongue would go numb, my throat would close off, and my eyes would fill with tears. I would choke out some inarticulate expression of sympathy and make a quick get-away.

Who had the power to evoke such an anxiety-filled response in me? Bereaved parents. I was scared to death of parents who had lost children. I could not begin to imagine the magnitude of that type of loss, and I had no idea what to say to them, or what NOT to say to them. What if I said the wrong thing and added to their pain? Or what if I was about to say the right thing but couldn't because my own tears made it impossible to talk, making everyone uncomfortable?

And then I became one of them. At the age of 16, my daughter Hannah was diagnosed with Grade IV *glioblastoma multiforme*, a highly aggressive form of brain cancer. After a year of radiation and chemotherapy treatments, she stepped into the arms of Jesus, and I suddenly became what I had feared the most...a bereaved parent.

Our family returned to church less than two weeks after Hannah's death, and now I was on the other side of the pew, so to speak. Now I was the one people either avoided or clumsily tried to comfort, all with the best of intentions. I found that, just like me, most people had no idea what to say or how to say it. They loved me, they were grieving with me, but they didn't know what to "do" with me.

Our churches are full of people who are hurting, many of whom have lost children or other loved ones. For me personally, returning to church was one of the most difficult things to do after my loss, and I've talked to many other bereaved parents who have expressed the same thing. Why is this?

- Families tend to sit together at church, and when your family is missing someone, their absence is particularly acute in the pew. Looking around and seeing other intact families worshiping beside you can also be very painful.
- The songs we sing in church can bring up very strong emotions. Songs about heaven can conjure up an almost unbearable longing in our hearts, and songs of praise can be difficult to sing when your heart is broken.

- There is an unspoken expectation at church that everyone is filled with the “joy of the Lord.” You know what I mean...we put on our best clothes and our Sunday School smiles and give the appearance that all is right in our world. A grieving parent may simply not have the emotional stamina to play that role.

So how do we as the body of Christ reach out to bereaved parents and give comfort without adding to their pain? Here are some suggestions from someone who’s been on both sides of this dilemma:

- Be patient with them. Grief is a marathon, not a sprint, and it’s important to respect the fact that people need time to heal. The grieving parent may not be ready to resume regular church activities right away, whether that’s teaching Sunday School, singing in the choir, working in the nursery or greeting at the door.
- Grief comes in waves. Don’t assume that a person is “over it” if you see them smiling or laughing, and don’t assume that a person is “not doing well” if you see them grieving outwardly.
- They may not be interested in small talk. Someone who has lost a child is grappling with deep spiritual issues and may not be interested in shallow conversation. Listen to them if they want to talk and don’t feel that you need to answer all their questions. Remember how well it went over once Job’s friends started talking!
- Grieving people are vulnerable and often hyper-sensitive, and they may have been hurt by things that well-meaning people have said to them. Some of those things might include:

“I know what you’re going through. My grandmother died last year.”

Something along the lines of “God always picks His best flowers first” or “God must have needed another angel in heaven.”

“She’s in a better place.” (There’s nothing really wrong with that because it’s true...it’s just that the grieving person really wants their loved one here with them!)

“It’s a good thing you have another child.”

- They also may have been hurt by those who have intentionally avoided them or who have said nothing to them at all. So what should we say to a grieving mom or dad?

“I love you, and I’m praying for you.”

That’s it? Could it be that simple? Yes, it really is. This statement, maybe accompanied by a warm hug, is all that’s needed to assure a bereaved parent of your care and concern.

Finally, while we want to give bereaved parents plenty of room to grieve, we also want to reach out to them with the expectation that God will bring healing into their lives. And when God brings that healing, as only He can, we will find that these folks can come out of their experience with a stronger faith, a deeper understanding of Scripture and a greater passion to serve the Lord than ever before. It’s our privilege, as the body of Christ, to walk beside them in love.

(Jill Sullivan, [“How to Help Bereaved Parents in Your Church”](#))

We have been appointed now for suffering—to help walk beside a family in love. They are not alone. May the Lord by His grace enable you as His people to rise to this hour in a way that brings great glory to His name and good to our church family. I know He will.

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All Scriptures quoted directly from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

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