



Sermon Transcript

April 7, 2019

Finding God in the Hard Place

The Steadfast Love of God

Psalm 57

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on April 7, 2019 at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Dr. Scott W. Solberg. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio version of this sermon may also be found on the church website at www.wethefc.com.

Sermon Text
Psalm 57

- ¹ Be merciful to me, O God, be merciful to me,
for in you my soul takes refuge;
in the shadow of your wings I will take refuge,
till the storms of destruction pass by.
- ² I cry out to God Most High,
to God who fulfills his purpose for me.
- ³ He will send from heaven and save me;
he will put to shame him who tramples on me. Selah
God will send out his steadfast love and his faithfulness!
- ⁴ My soul is in the midst of lions;
I lie down amid fiery beasts—
the children of man, whose teeth are spears and arrows,
whose tongues are sharp swords.
- ⁵ Be exalted, O God, above the heavens! Let your glory be over all the earth!
- ⁶ They set a net for my steps;
my soul was bowed down.
They dug a pit in my way,
but they have fallen into it themselves. Selah
- ⁷ My heart is steadfast, O God,
my heart is steadfast!
I will sing and make melody!
- ⁸ Awake, my glory!
Awake, O harp and lyre!
I will awake the dawn!
- ⁹ I will give thanks to you, O Lord, among the peoples;
I will sing praises to you among the nations.
- ¹⁰ For your steadfast love is great to the heavens, your faithfulness to the clouds.
- ¹¹ Be exalted, O God, above the heavens! Let your glory be over all the earth!

Introduction

Last week we made the observation that our psalm this morning should be read in tandem with the psalm we looked at last week. Psalm 142 and Psalm 57 are tied together because they are both attributed to David when he fled from Saul and hid himself in the cave of Adullam. The title affixed to the top of Psalm 57 says, “Of David, when he fled from Saul, in the cave.”

But we noted last week that while the setting is the same—the cave of Adullam—the mood between these two psalms is different. We discovered last week, in Psalm 142, that David was discouraged and rather gloomy. We can understand why he might be overcome with a spirit of discouragement and fear and anger. He is after all, running for his life. Saul has amassed his vast army and he is in pursuit of David. He wants to kill David. So we learned last week from Psalm 142 how to cry out to God when we are overcome with anger or grief or fear or discouragement because of the hardships of life. Tell God how you are feeling. Be still and quiet and ponder what you know to be true about God. Make your petition to God with faith. Know God is at work through you.

But in Psalm 57, we find the mood of David to be much improved. Here he is expressing his complete trust in God. He says in verse 7 that his *“heart is steadfast.”* And not only is he trusting in God, but he is found singing praises to God while in the cave. Look at verses 7-9. *“I will sing and make melody! Awake, my glory! Awake, O harp and lyre! I will awake the dawn! I will give thanks to you, O Lord, among the peoples; I will sing praises to you among the nations.”* His situation hasn’t changed. Saul is still chasing after him. He is still in the cave. But his mood is so much different than what we find in Psalm 142. In fact, this psalm can be divided into two parts and each part ends with the same confident and joyful refrain. In verses 5 and 11 he sings, *“Be exalted, O God, above the heavens! Let your glory be over all the earth!”*

So what is it that enables David to express confident trust in God even while he was in the cave? What is it that enables David to sing praises to God, even while he finds himself on the run for his life? Do you know what it is? It is the assurance that God loves him. That may be the very thing you question when you are in the cave. “If God loves me, why am I going through what I am going through?” And yet, the moment I can get my eyes back on the truth that God loves me, I am able to trust him. And when I recall his love for me, it causes me to sing, even in the cave.

I mentioned that this psalm is divided into two sections. In verses 1-5, David expresses

his trust in God. Where does that trust come from? It sure doesn't come from his circumstances. He is in "the hard place." He is in a cave. Saul is pursuing him. He doesn't know what tomorrow will bring. Where does his trust in God come from? At the end of verse 3 we discover that the anchor of his trust in God is found in his assurance that "*God will send out his steadfast love and faithfulness.*" It is the love of God for him that anchors his trust in God.

This is the very same thing that fuels his singing in the second half of the psalm. Notice how verse 10 begins with that little connecting word "*for.*" It connects you to what David had said in verse 9. In verse 9 he says, "*I will sing praises to you among the nations.*" Why? How can you joyfully sing praises to God when your life is a mess? He states the reason for his song in verse 10. It is God's love for him that causes him to sing. "*For your steadfast love is great to the heavens, your faithfulness to the clouds.*" It is the love of God for him that fuels his song of praise to God.

It is God's *steadfast love and faithfulness* that anchors David's trust in God and fuels his worship of God even in difficult situations. The same thing is true of you and me when we find ourselves in the hard place—in the cave. Last week we mentioned that when we are in the hard place—when we find ourselves in the cave—all kinds of questions begin to surface in our minds. At times, our suffering causes us to feel abandoned by God. We may wonder and question why God is allowing this difficulty to happen and it may cause us to question how God is feeling about us. Does he still love me? Has he turned his back on me? These are rather natural questions that emerge in our human hearts when we find ourselves trying to make sense of "the cave." Last week we listed the seven questions that the psalmist asked in Psalm 77. They were listed in rapid fire, one after the other. They were questions that emerged out of his own suffering.

*Has the Lord rejected me forever?
Will he never again be kind to me?
Is his unfailing love gone forever?
Have his promises permanently failed?
Has God forgotten to be gracious:?
Has he slammed the door on his compassion?*

You know the answer to all these questions. No . . . No . . . No . . . No . . . No . . . No . . . No! But they are questions that naturally surface when we find ourselves in the cave. "*Is the unfailing love of God gone forever?*" So like David, the anchor of our trust in God and the fuel for our praise of God is to be reminded again of the love of God for us.

That Wonderful Word: Steadfast Love

I want to start out by talking about the love of God. Since this is the anchor for our trust and the fuel for our praise, what are we talking about when we refer to the “*steadfast love of God?*” J. D. Greear notes that “Love may be the most universally agreed-upon attribute of God in the United States today . . . But I am not sure people truly get it. Scripture paints a picture of God’s love as so shocking, so scandalous, that the only response is, “*Amazing love! How can it be?*” Yet for most people in our churches, the response is probably more like, “Well, that’s nice.”¹

Perhaps part of our problem in understanding the love of God is a language problem. The word “love” in English is a “catch-all” kind of a word. We use the word “love” to describe the plate of spaghetti that we enjoy or the team we root for or the close friend we are fond of or the spouse we commit to or the children and grandchildren we would do anything for or the God we worship. The context with which we use that word helps us understand the difference between loving spaghetti and pledging to your spouse—till death do us part or saying that we love God. We just don’t have different words to describe the various nuances with which we use the word “love.” And so perhaps that is why we lose something in the translation about the love of God. If I use the same word to describe my love for God that I do for my love for spaghetti, well then, my response to God’s love might be, “Well, that’s nice.”

However, in Hebrew, there is a very specific word that is used to describe the “*steadfast love of God.*” It is one of the most important words in the Bible. It is the word *chesed*. This kind of love is based on a covenant commitment. It is a loyal love. It is a faithful love. That word *steadfast* helps define for us in English the kind of love with which God loves us. Psalm 136 says 26 times, “*his steadfast love endures forever.*” “*Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever. Give thanks to the God of gods, for his steadfast love endures forever. Give thanks to the Lord of lords, for his steadfast love endures forever.*” On and on this cadence goes for 26 verses. God’s steadfast love for you *endures forever.*

What makes this kind of love so shocking? What is so scandalous about this love? It is a loyal love that God expresses to a group of people who are not very loyal in return. It is not an earned love, that is for sure. It is not a deserved love, no doubt about that. There are many times when it is not even a reciprocal love. Rather, it is a gracious love that will not let us go in spite of ourselves. “*Give thanks to the God of heaven, for his steadfast love endures forever.*”

Think of the biblical stories that illustrate the *steadfast love of God*. I think of Gomer, the wife of the prophet Hosea. She repeatedly ran into the arms of other lovers, illustrating what we do to God over and over again when we worship other things besides God. And yet the prophet was told to not divorce his adulterous wife to illustrate God's *steadfast love* for his people. In Hosea 3:1 he says, "*Go and love your wife again, even though she commits adultery with another lover. This will illustrate that the LORD still loves Israel, even though the people have turned to other gods and love to worship them.*" Or as God says in Hosea 2:19, "*I will betroth you to me forever . . . in steadfast love and in mercy.*" Shocking! Scandalous!

Or think of the story of the Prodigal Son. He runs away from home and he squanders his dad's inheritance while his dad is still alive. And yet his father is waiting and longing to run out and embrace his wayward son and to welcome him home. And when he welcomes his son—this rascal—he celebrates by throwing a party. J. D. Greear reminds us that "we are the prodigal son, for whom God stands daily on the porch of heaven, longing for us to come home. And for us he sacrifices not a fatted calf, but his very Son, Jesus, at the cross."² Shocking! Scandalous!

This is why we hear the psalms singing over and over again about the *steadfast love of God*. In Psalm 143:8 David sings, "*Let me hear in the morning of your steadfast love, for in you I trust.*" In other words, first thing in the morning I want to affirm that I am a son or a daughter of God and therefore I am deeply loved by God. If that is the case, I can trust God with whatever this day throws at me. In our psalm this morning, David says in verse 10, "*For your steadfast love is great to the heavens, your faithfulness to the clouds.*" In other words, God's *steadfast love* is never out of reach. There is nowhere we can go and find ourselves outside of this love. It extends as far as we can imagine or see.

And so here is David in the cave of Adullam. Here is David in this "hard place." We acknowledged last week that he had his moments where the cave and "hard place" was wearing on him. He had his moments where he was down. But it was the *steadfast love of God*—the knowledge that God had bound himself to David and would not let him go—that anchored his trust and caused him to sing.

Donald Grey Barnhouse once said, "The pursuing love of God is the greatest wonder in the spiritual universe. When we see this love at work through Hosea we may wonder if God is really like that. But he is. Think about it: Many years later he would give man the trees of the forest and the iron in the ground . . . He gave them the ability to form that iron into nails, and to fashion those trees into a cross . . . And then he stretched out his

hands upon that tree and allowed us to nail him there, and in doing so he took our sins upon himself. This is our God and there is no one else like him.”³ If God loves you with that kind of love, you can trust him. If God loves you with that kind of love, you can even sing in the cave. This is why David sings with confidence and joy two times in this psalm, “*Be exalted, O God, above the heavens! Let your glory be over all the earth!*”

God’s Steadfast Love: An Anchor of Trust

If I know the *steadfast love* of God, then I can trust God even if I don’t understand what is going on with my life. That is exactly what David does in the first part of this psalm. What does that look like? What does it look like to trust God? It is a ideal we throw around all the time, but what does it really look like?

Turn to God: To trust God you need to turn to God. That is what David does in verse 1. While he finds shelter in the cave, he realizes that his ultimate refuge is found in God. I love the imagery of verse 1, “*in the shadow of your wings I will take refuge, till the storms of destruction pass by.*” This is a repeated image throughout the psalms. It is the image of a mother bird sheltering her young from the storm. This week I “googled” images of mother birds sheltering her young under her wings. It was fascinating to see six pairs of legs sticking out under a pair of wings. Psalm 91:4 says, “*He will cover you with his pinions (pinions are the outer wings of a bird, their flight feathers) and under his wings you will find shelter.*” This one who loves us is the only one who can provide shelter in the storm. Turn to him.

Laura Chandler is the wife of a pastor by the name of Matt Chandler. Matt Chandler is pretty well known within the evangelical world. He pastored a church in Dallas, TX. A few years ago it was discovered Matt had a brain tumor and it was malignant. At the time, they had a not-yet-1-year-old, a 4-year-old and a 7-year-old. While Matt was getting radiation treatments, he had no energy and Laura was left tending to the busy schedule of the family—school, homework, diapers, baseball practice, baths and bedtime stories. She recalls sitting at her son’s baseball practice grieving and mourning her husband’s absence and what had become her new reality. She was having trouble getting her feet underneath her, finding it hard to find stable ground. Prior to her husband’s illness the normalcy of life that comes with good health is what gave them a sense of stability. But now that was gone. And then she read from Isaiah 33:6 that *God will be the stability of your times*. She wrote, “Here I found comfort: my stability is ultimately found in the Lord. To cry out to him in the midst of the storm is to find he alone can sustain me.”⁴ That is what David found when he turned to God as his refuge.

Confidence in God: Because of God's love for him, David can say with confidence what he says in verse 2, "I cry out to God Most High, to God who fulfills his purpose for me." Here David is in the cave. It is not easy. He likens those who are after him in verse 4 to *lions* and *fiery beasts*. And yet with confidence he turns to the God who loves him and he believes that God is fulfilling his purposes for him through the struggles of the cave. To trust God is to have confidence in the sovereignty of God.

There are two sides to this coin. When David says that God "*fulfills his purpose for me*" he is recognizing how God is sovereign and in control. I am not claiming he understands the mystery of God's sovereignty and how he uses the hardships of life to accomplish his purposes. All I need to know is that God does use the cave for his purpose in me. So on one side of this coin we know that God is at work in our trials and in our hardships and because he loves us, we can trust him with what we are facing.

Joni Eareckson Tada grappled with this when she became a quadriplegic due to a diving accident when she was a teenager. When she first was coming to grips with her "accident" she envisioned God turning his back momentarily to attend to some problem in a far away land. Satan, seizing the moment, placed his foot in the small of her back and shoved her into the shallow waters of the Chesapeake Bay. God, startled by her cry, whirled around . . . too late. He is left to piece back together the shattered remains of her life. And then she said with confidence, at a conference for those with various disabilities who could wonder if God had gotten distracted when their issues presented themselves, but she said of this view of God, "No!" And again she said, "No!"⁵ Though she doesn't fully grasp the sovereignty of God, she believes like David that God "*fulfills his purpose for me.*" And so with confidence, she trusts the *steadfast love of God*.

Faith in God: This leads us to the other side of the coin with God's purposes for me. He is going to save me. And so I can put my faith in God. This is what David professes in verse 3, "*He will send from heaven and save me; he will put to shame him who tramples on me. Selah God will send out his steadfast love and his faithfulness!*" David is confident in the *steadfast love of God* and that God will deliver him. Now we know that this does not mean that God will always remove us from the cave. We mentioned last week that some of you have a cave that is here to stay. Joni's "cave" will be with her until God takes her home. But God will take her home!

The comfort of the gospel and the message of the Bible is that God delights to glorify himself in the deliverance of his people. In the cross of Jesus the glory of God is demonstrated through our salvation. For those who look to Jesus, there is coming a day

when we will be fully delivered and the purpose God has for us will be fully accomplished. Paul put it this way in 2 Timothy 4:17-18. *“But the Lord stood by me and strengthened me, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. So I was rescued from the lion’s mouth [sound similar to David’s testimony in verse 4]. And yet we know that eventually Paul was martyred. Where was God then? Listen to what he says next. “The Lord will rescue me from every evil deed and bring me safely into his heavenly kingdom.” Like David in verses 5 and 11, Paul bursts with song, “To him be the glory forever and ever. Amen.”*

Laura Chandler put it this way, “I thought what I wanted was Matt’s healing and the restoration of the “old normal.” While those things are good to desire and even petition the Lord for, the healing of one disease can be eclipsed by another dismal diagnosis. The “old normal” is an infinitely fragile state. The only reliable haven is to be found in Christ, to be hidden in him so that when he—who is my life—appears, I will appear with him in glory.”⁶ The cave reminds us this isn’t all there is. There is a deliverance coming—a glory coming—we are yet to see. It is the *steadfast love of God* that enables us to turn to God and to have confidence in God and to put our faith in God because in the end he *“will bring us safely into his heavenly kingdom.”* Trust Jesus!

God’s Steadfast Love: Fuel For Singing

This brings us to the second half of the psalm and it is dominated with David singing! He is singing in the cave! We already noted that it is the *steadfast love of God* that gives birth to his song. He says, *“I will sing and make melody! Awake, my glory! Awake, O harp and lyre! [Break out the instruments!] I will awake the dawn! [The first thing I do when my feet hit the floor in the morning is to sing of the steadfast love and faithfulness of God] I will give thanks to you, O Lord, among the peoples; I will sing praises to you among the nations. [Why do I sing? How can I sing in the cave?] For your steadfast love is great to the heavens, your faithfulness to the clouds.”*

This morning we sang the hymn *Great is Thy Faithfulness*. The biblical text that inspired this hymn is anchored in an Old Testament book about suffering. The name of the book says it all—*Lamentations*. It is a book that chronicles the cry of the people of Israel as they are uprooted from their homeland and exiled to Babylon. Bonnie and I just finished watching the mini-series *War and Peace* based on Tolstoy’s novel with the same title. It is set in the time of the Napoleonic wars, when France invaded Russia and advanced all the way to Moscow. As the French invaded Russia, you could feel the “lamentation” of a people uprooted from their homes and marching off to “who knows

where?” That is the background of the book of Lamentations. In fact, they felt so distant from God they cry out in Lamentations 3:44, “*You have wrapped yourself with a cloud so that no prayer can pass through.*” Do you ever feel like that? How can you go from feeling like that to singing?

Right in the middle of Lamentations 3, we see a glimmer of light break through their despair. In Lamentations 3:21 it says, “*But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope.*” What do you think it is that they call to mind that brings hope in such a dark time? “*The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.*”

I have done a lot of funerals. Understandably, the word “lamentation” goes hand in hand with a funeral. And yet, do you know what is a distinctive feature of a Christian funeral? We sing! I often have the vantage point of being up front and watching the service unfold out in the congregation. It is fascinating to see how foreign this is to people outside of faith. It is almost startling to them. How can you sing at a time like this? This is the ultimate cave. We can sing because of the *steadfast love of God* and because of Christ and the cross and the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, *he will bring us safely into his heavenly kingdom.* In fact it is not just in death we sing. You come here each and every Sunday and give testimony to this reality as you sing in the midst of all your struggles. How can you do that? It is because you call to mind the *steadfast love of God* and this brings hope. So we sing!

Conclusion

In the cave, sometimes you are down. When you are down, cry out to God. But sometimes you are up. What lifts you up when you are in the cave? It is calling to mind the *steadfast love of God* expressed to you through Jesus Christ. It is the anchor of your trust. It is the fuel for your song.

Eugene Peterson wrote a book on the Psalms of Ascent. It is what we looked at last Sunday night and will finish next Sunday night. The book is called *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*. It became a classic. Upon his death this past year, they released a commemorative edition and his son wrote the preface for this edition. In the preface he reflects back to when his dad finished his translation of the New Testament—called *The Message*—a contemporary easy to understand translation of the Bible. The publishing company had invited Peterson and his family to Colorado to a ceremony that celebrated and commissioned this great work.

His son was asked to say some words at this service. He recounts how he used to tease his dad that in spite of the countless sermons he had preached in his long career, he really only had one message that he just kept repeating. So he decided to write a poem and read it at the commissioning service. It was a rather long poem that poked fun at his dad for “fooling everyone” all these years by speaking the same message over and over again. And so as he came to the end of the poem he summarized what that one message was that constantly came from his dad’s sermons. And here it was . . .

Because for fifty years you have been telling me the secret
For fifty years you have stealed into my room at night and whispered softly to my
sleeping head.
It’s the same message over and over and you don’t vary it one bit.
God loves you.
He’s on your side.
He’s coming after you.
He’s relentless.⁷

This is the anchor or our trust. This is the fuel for our song. When you find yourself in the cave, this is what you need to call to mind. *“For your steadfast love is great to the heavens, your faithfulness to the clouds. Be exalted, O God, above the heavens! Let your glory be over all the earth! Be exalted, O God, above the heavens! Let your glory be over all the earth!”*

¹J. D. Greear “3 Questions About God’s Steadfast Love” www.jdgreear.com Sept. 14, 2015

²Ibid

³Donald Grey Barnhouse, quoted in Greear

⁴Laura Chandler “My Husband’s Cancer and the Lord of Steadfast Love www.thecoalition.org
January 26, 2016

⁵Sam Storms “The Stability of His Steadfast Love—Psalm 33” www.samstorms.com

⁶Chandler

⁷Leif Peterson in the preface of *Commemorative Edition: A Long Obedience in the Same
Direction* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2018) 3-4

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COMMUNITY GROUPS

Getting To Know Me Questions

1. Share with the group something you are celebrating.
2. Share with the group a challenge you are facing.
Spend time in prayer: thanking God for what you are celebrating and praying for the challenges you are facing.
3. Share something you are taking from the sermon.

Diving Into The Word

4. Read Psalm 57:10; 143:8; Hosea 3:1; Lamentations 3:21-23. What do you discover about the *steadfast love of God* in these passages? What amazes you about God's love? What encourages you about God's love?
5. Read Psalm 136. What would be some verses you could add that would describe *the steadfast love of the LORD* in your life. For example: God has surrounded me with a wonderful group of Christian brothers and sisters **for his steadfast love endures forever**. (Consider repeating that phrase after each example is given.)
6. Read Psalm 57:1-5. Identify the ways David puts his trust in God. What stands out to you? Where do you need to grow in your trust of God? How does 1 Timothy 4:17-18 build your trust in God?
7. Read Psalm 57:6-11. What role does singing play in your Christian life? How does singing help you focus on God's *steadfast love*. Is there a particular song that deeply touches your heart?

Taking It Home

8. What is something you are taking from your discussion that you could share with someone else for their encouragement. Who might that "someone" be?