

A psalm of David.

- ¹ *LORD, hear my prayer,
listen to my cry for mercy;
in your faithfulness and righteousness
come to my relief.*
- ² *Do not bring your servant into judgment,
for no one living is righteous before you.*
- ³ *The enemy pursues me,
he crushes me to the ground;
he makes me dwell in the darkness
like those long dead.*
- ⁴ *So my spirit grows faint within me;
my heart within me is dismayed.*
- ⁵ *I remember the days of long ago;
I meditate on all your works
and consider what your hands have done.*
- ⁶ *I spread out my hands to you;
I thirst for you like a parched land.*
- ⁷ *Answer me quickly, LORD;
my spirit fails.
Do not hide your face from me
or I will be like those who go down to the pit.*
- ⁸ *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 entrust my life.*
- ⁹ *Rescue me from my enemies, LORD,
for I hide myself in you.*
- ¹⁰ *Teach me to do your will,
for you are my God;
may your good Spirit
lead me on level ground.*
- ¹¹ *For your name's sake, LORD, preserve my life;
in your righteousness, bring me out of trouble.*
- ¹² *In your unfailing love, silence my enemies;
destroy all my foes,
for I am your servant. (Psalm 143)*

Life Takes a Toll

I hate conflict. Whether it's in my family, or in my congregation, or with strangers, I have an almost pathological dislike for it. Yet, sometimes conflict is hard to avoid. People do stupid and selfish things and you are on the receiving end. If you do or say anything about it, you find yourself in conflict. I hate the way I feel during and after a conflict. I often can't sleep and I lose my appetite. I feel angry and depressed and I have trouble getting work done. Does it ever feel that way to you? There's a price that we pay for conflict. In truth, there's a price that we pay for many things in this life. Sin takes a toll on us – our own sin or the sin of others. On this side of heaven, there will always be things that hurt and take away our peace and our sleep and appetites. That's just life here. Psalm 143 leads us in a meditation on that reality this morning. It focuses

especially on conflict, but what it says could apply to any of the hurts that sin inflicts on us. God put this psalm into our Bibles because in this sinful world, **life takes a toll.**

I.

But God brings relief. That's what King David knew. He wrote Psalm 143 and he faced many conflicts in his life. Early in his life, he was an officer in King Saul's army, but Saul feared him because God had chosen David to be the next king. So Saul tried to kill him. David fled and Saul chased him with his army. After David became king, for seven years, there was a rival king in the north. After he consolidated his rule over the whole kingdom, he fought one war after another to keep his people free. Eventually, one of his sons, Absalom tried to steal the throne from him and David had to fight a civil war against him. When David was dying, another of his sons tried to seize the throne. Which conflict is this psalm about?

It's hard to say. But does it really matter? The psalm records the effect that conflict has on our hearts. David was a warrior at a time when warfare was fought up close and personal. David had fought and killed men that he could see eye to eye. So when we hear about his emotional reaction to conflict, we're not talking about some weak, girly man who's too in touch with his feelings. We're talking about a man that warriors respected and followed and cheered for. That he-man says, **"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."**

His life felt dark, like he was already dead. His spirit was faint and his heart was dismayed. If David had lived today, his therapist might have said that he was struggling with depression. So what does that say about us when we can't eat or sleep because we're upset about conflict? Maybe no one is trying to kill us, but hurt and frustration and depression are the natural result of conflict. Like David, the natural response of a Christian is to go to God for relief. David prays, **"In your faithfulness and righteousness, come to my relief."** God has promised to hear and answer our prayers. If he is truly a faithful God who keeps all his promises, if he is truly a righteous God who stands by his word, he must answer our prayers. David holds God to what he has said.

But then he very carefully continues, **"Do not bring your servant into judgment, for no one living is righteous before you."** A truly righteous God is also a truly just God. So he has to stand by his word of law. That means that we all should pay for our sins in hell, because no one living is truly righteous before God. Don't we all have to admit that the list of our sins that God could punish is endless? Don't we have to admit that many times, the conflicts that we're involved in are at least partially our own fault? I've never seen a situation in which one person is 100% responsible for a conflict and the other person is 0% responsible. We're all sinners. We contribute to the hurt and sorrow of our lives, even if we were trying to do the right thing and we just screwed up. None of us is righteous, none of us is perfect in God's sight.

But God doesn't judge us on the basis of what we do and say and think and feel. He judges us on the basis of what Christ did and said and thought and felt. He truly was righteous in our place. He is the one person who was 100% innocent in every conflict he was in. Even when his enemies attacked him and he defended himself, he was innocent because he was speaking the word of God to them and calling them to repent. When God gave us faith in Christ, he covered our lives with the holiness of our Savior and washed away all the sin that deserves his punishment. So now, when we go to God in prayer, we go clothed in the perfect life of Christ. That is the basis of our request.

That means that the hurts and the sorrows we face are not God's punishment against us. Jesus rose and took all our punishment away. Even when there is a direct correlation between our actions and our suffering – I was rude to someone and he got in my face and even breaks my nose, I cut off someone on the highway and they made an unpleasant gesture, I broke the law and I suffered the consequences in the legal system – even those things are not punishment, not in the true sense. Punishment is what sin deserves. All that we Christians suffer is discipline. God sends consequences to teach us to resist temptation and to break down our pride so that we go to him for forgiveness and relief. That forgiveness is ours. Because of Christ, we can take every conflict to our God for relief. Because of Christ, God will hear our prayers when our heart is breaking. Because of Christ, we know that we are forgiven and loved and we belong to him. Life does indeed take a toll. This world is full of sin and it hurts and leaves terrible scars. But God brings relief because of Christ.

II.

But what do we do when we hurt because of all that life does to us? How do we manage the depression and the grief that we inflict on ourselves? David's prayer answers that question. **Life takes a toll. But God shows us the way to go.** That begins with prayer. God invites us to lay all our burdens on him. Prayer is more than just getting something off our chest. We come to God with all that hurts and all that we can't resolve, we put it in his lap and we walk away. If our faith were perfect, we would only have to do that once, and then we'd be at peace because we'd know it was taken care of, even if we couldn't see for a long time what God's solution was going to be. Sadly, in this sinful world, our faith will never be perfect. So we keep coming back, for as long as it takes for God's promises to calm our hearts and give us the peace that comes from knowing that he's on the job and he's going to do what is best for us.

But sometimes we do have to wait for God's solution and the hurt continues to take its toll while we wait. That's why prayer is not intended to be a one-sided conversation. We speak to God in prayer, and he answers in his Word. David says, **"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."** God's side of the conversation is the good news of all that he has done for us. For David, that meant looking back on what God did for Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and Moses. It meant looking back centuries to his great acts of salvation and understanding what they promised him. For you and me, it means looking back to the cross and the empty tomb. We need to hear and meditate on Christ to heal and grow and trust. Every time we hear the good news of our Savior dying and rising for us, every time we hear what our Savior promises, every time we stop and look back at him, the Holy Spirit works. He builds our faith.

My friends, Jesus laid down his life so that you will not go to hell. The Son of God became man and lived and died and rose again to free you from all that sin does to you here. Jesus is ruling all things for your good. He will hear your prayers. He will overcome all the hurts and sorrows of this life. He will triumph over those who attack you and he will heal your heart.

Trust that Savior. Trust has a huge effect on our lives and on our hearts. David can't separate trusting God from living for God. Right after he appeals to God for mercy in his near despair, he says, **"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."** He says, **"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."** Knowing that God loves us no matter how much life hurts, leads us to follow him. Knowing that God rescues us from every enemy we face in this life, leads us to want to do his will. That leads us back to God's Word where we learn what his will is. God's great acts of salvation change our lives.

While we are focused on God and his love and on living for him, God does heal us. The gospel in all his promises heals us. Focusing on God turns our hearts away from focusing on ourselves and on our hurts. That is the first necessary step to overcome our gloom and our sorrow. Trust in God to overcome all those who attack you and make your life miserable. Trust in God to heal your heart when it hurts. Trust in God to give you his Spirit so that you grow through the gospel and live for him. Trust in God to lead you on level ground. King David lived in a very rocky and hilly country. There were no sidewalks out to the pasture where he tended his father's sheep as a boy. It was easy to turn your ankle and then have to limp back home, maybe a couple of miles or more. It's easy for us to turn our ankles, too. I don't just mean physically. It's easy for life to hurt, for us to make stupid, sinful mistakes, for us to disobey God and make life harder. But the Holy Spirit works through the gospel to draw us closer to God. He leads us to live for God. And God controls all things to keep us safe even from the consequences of our own sin. God only allows that hurt to reach us which will do us good.

The psalm concludes with a prayer that God would punish David's enemies, because he is the Lord's servant. This is not the vindictive attack that it might sound like to our modern ears. David was God's servant. His enemies, by and large, were enemies of the faith. They were servants of the devil who would spend eternity in hell if they didn't repent. David asks God to do for him what he promised to do: to triumph over the enemies of the faith. We pray the same thing. That doesn't mean that we ask God to strike down every person who ever wrongs us or hurts us. We do pray for their repentance. We do pray for their hearts to change and for them to live new lives. But we do also pray that in the end, we would triumph over all those who attack us because we are believers. Sometimes, we see that here, at least temporarily. But when Christ returns, all those who sided

with the devil will go to hell forever. All those who sided with Christ, will be purified. All our differences between each other will be gone and we will live in perfect unity forever.

God will give us true peace. God will heal all the hurts in our hearts. God does that now, in answer to our prayers. But on this side of heaven, it can never be complete. We'll always have scars and memories of hurt. We'll always struggle to get past things and to forgive. Sometimes, even the healing that we do get here takes a long time to come. But it does come. And the healing God gives us here, incomplete though it may be, is a wonderful gift of his love. And when Jesus returns, all the hurt and sorrow and scars of this life will be over. And we will live in joy with him forever. Let's sing Psalm 143.