

God to the Rescue

By David H. Roper

We have a couple working with small children in our Sunday School class back in Boise, Idaho, who told me that just before Christmas they asked a little boy in the class, "John, what do you want for Christmas?" Little John said, "Everything!" That is a very positive outlook on life. It sounds fair and just to me. That is what I have always wanted out of life--everything. But we discover that we do not get everything out of life that we would like to have. Life tends to be disappointing at times. We have great expectations, but our hope is so often disappointed.

Psalms 107, which we will study this morning, explains why life is that way. The Psalms in the Old Testament are roughly equivalent to our Hymn Book. The Psalms were the songs that were used in the temple worship, and they were written very much as our hymns were written. Some Psalms came right out of the individual experiences of people, such as David's Psalm written while he was in the cave, or a Psalm that he wrote when he made a fool out of himself. These are Psalms that grew out of his experience, and he, having composed them, then passed them on to the people and they became part of their corporate worship. We have psalms and songs like that in our Hymn Book, such as John Newton's hymn, "Amazing Grace." John Newton was a slave trader. He had a slave ship that brought blacks from Africa to the United States, exposing them to the wretched conditions that they experienced on these sailing ships. But he met the Lord, and as a result he wrote that song. Now that is the sort of thing you have in the Psalms, in some cases, but others of the Psalms were written specifically for corporate worship, just as many of our hymns are. Psalm 107 is a case in point. It was written after the Judeans came back from exile in Babylon, so this is a Psalm which was written specifically for the returning, repatriated exiles to give praise. We do not know who wrote it. Some Levite, perhaps, wrote it, or someone who sang in the choir, but it was some godly man whom God used to express his praise on behalf of the exiles.

The structure of the Psalm is easily discernible. There is an introduction in verses 1 and 2, and then from verse 4 down through verse 32 you have a series of little vignettes, descriptive of various circumstances in life, in which most of us can place ourselves. There is something of a summary statement in verses 33 through 42, and then the psalmist's conclusion in verse 43. So it is a good sermon format, and we will follow it.

**Give thanks to the Lord,
for he is good;
his love endures forever.
Let the redeemed of the Lord say this
--those he redeemed from the hand of the foe,
those he gathered from the lands,
from east and west, from north and south.**

You can tell from the parallelism in verses 2 and 3 that the "redeemed" are those whom God gathered back to the land of Judah "from east and west, from north and south," where they had been scattered by the Babylonians. We are told two things in verse 1 that the redeemed are to say. The first thing is that "God is good." When the Bible says that God is good it means that he is absolutely good. We have a tendency to use that word "good" a lot. We refer to someone as a "good" man, but we do not really mean that. What we mean is that he is good sometimes, but we do not really think he is absolutely good. There are times when he may be downright rotten. So we tend to use that word in a relative sense. But when the Bible talks about God as being "good," it means he is absolutely good. James says, "there is no shifting shadow with him," i.e., God's goodness is not like a cloudy day when clouds are being driven through the sky and one moment it is dark and the next moment the sun shines. God is not like that. He is always good. A man referred to Jesus once as a "good teacher," and Jesus said, "Now wait a minute. Why do you call me good teacher? There is no one good but God." Now he was not disclaiming deity.

What he was doing was testing this man's concept of goodness: "Do you understand what you are saying when you say that someone is 'good'?"

Boise is located right on the northern end of the great American desert, up in the high desert just before the rolling hills give way to the Sawtooths. There is nothing between the city and the Snake River but about 75 miles of sagebrush. It is beautiful country, mountainous, rugged, a nice place to go and get away from it all. A month or so ago I decided to take a trip into the desert. I checked with one of my friends about the road south because they are all gravel roads. There was more than a foot of snow on the ground, so I was not sure I could get through. But my friend said, "The roads are good-those are good roads." So I took off, and I was about 20 miles into the desert when I came down into a little draw. When I got right into the middle of it I had this sinking feeling that something was wrong. I looked, and saw water beginning to flow in under the doors in my car. I came to a stop and I could just feel my car going down, so I put it into reverse and backed up very gingerly. When I got up on dry ground, I realized I had gone right out onto a frozen river. Now that was not a good road! I don't care what my friend said. It was good for about 29 miles, but that last mile was a killer. Well, God is not like that. He is always good. He will never betray you; he will never lead you into some kind of trap and then say, "Aha! You thought all along that I was good and trustworthy and now you find out that I am not." That is not the kind of God he is. So the first thing the redeemed are to say is, 'God is good.

The second thing we are told is, "his love endures forever." It never ends; it goes on and on. Now that is hard for us to believe, because we have never seen that. I do not know anyone whose love goes on forever. My love does not go on forever. That is a fact. There are those warm, intimate times when you get your kids in your lap and you just love those little rascals, but the next minute they dump hamster food all over the kitchen floor and you want to kill the little brats. Or there are those times when you say to your wife, "Honey, we will just never fuss again." But you do, because no one's love goes on forever. But God's does. You can count on that. In all the difficulties and vicissitudes of life, God's love keeps on going. It never fails, and that is what the redeemed ought to say.

Now beginning with verse 4, the psalmist gives us the first of these word pictures. These are human problems, human predicaments, and as I said, you will probably find yourself somewhere here.

**Some wandered in desert wastelands,
finding no way to a city where they could settle.
They were hungry and thirsty,
and their lives ebbed away.
Then they cried out to the Lord in their trouble,
and he delivered them from their distress.
He led them by a straight way to a city where they could settle.
Let them give thanks to the Lord for his unfailing love
and his wonderful deeds for men,
for he satisfies the thirsty and fills the hungry with good things.**

The people described here are the rootless, restless, alienated, disenchanting people of this world; the people who just cannot find themselves, those who, in the words of the song of some years ago, "can't get no satisfaction." The world is full of them. In those years when we were working with university students there was an entire culture, a whole community of people like this. They had no roots, no absolutes. They reminded me of a little dinghy in deep water, with a little anchor hanging down a few feet under it. They had nothing to hook onto, no roots, no place to rest. There are still people like that. Perhaps you are like that, and you are looking for a city, a place of security, a place where you can put down roots and feel loved and wanted and cared for. These people go from job to job. They are never satisfied with anything. They go from love affair to love affair. Their life is like a soap opera. They use Valium, dope, booze, anything to kill the pain, but the pain remains. Perhaps you have been there, or perhaps you are there today. The psalmist says these people "cried out to the Lord in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress." God comes to the rescue. He is in the business of doing that.

I have a friend in Boise, Bob Kline, who is the head of the Mountain Rescue Team. When someone, a skier or a hunter, gets lost in the mountains, old Bob straps on the snowshoes and he goes and gets them. That is his job. He

may be out there four or five days hunting them down, but he will find them. He brings them back, alive if possible, sometimes more dead than alive, but he finds them, and he brings them back. That is what God does; he comes to the rescue. But we have to ask him; we have to cry out for help. There are a lot of us who have been in that condition, who feel that just right around the next corner we are going to find some answer, something that will satisfy us, anything but God. But sooner or later you come to the place where you have run out of every possibility except the Lord, and when you cry out to him he comes to the rescue. C. S. Lewis said that men in desperate need of strength might cry out, "Billy Bud! Help me!" and nothing much happens. Or a man in need of wisdom might cry out, "William Shakespeare! Help me!" and nothing much happens. But, Lewis says, for 1900 years when people have cried out, "Lord Jesus! Help me!" something happens. God comes to the rescue. He leads them to a "straight way to a city where they could settle." He gives them the security that they are looking for, so the psalmist says, "Let them give thanks to the Lord for his unfailing love and his wonderful deeds for men, for he satisfies the thirsty."

The Hebrew word that is translated "thirsty" here means "dried out beyond hope." It is descriptive of a desiccated plant that does not have any life left in it. I walked through our living room the other day and looked up at one of Carolyn's ferns and it was obvious that it had taken gas. It had just croaked; it was hanging over the side, and all the leaves were falling off. I took it to Carolyn and said, "I think it's dead. She said, "I think so too." So we dumped it; it was beyond hope. Now what the psalmist is saying is that God rescues even those beyond hope of reclamation. "He satisfies the thirsty," those who are dried out, those who have found no satisfaction in anything, and he 'fills the hungry with good things."

The second picture is in verse 10 through verse 16:

**Some sat in darkness and the deepest gloom,
prisoners suffering in iron chains,
for they had rebelled against the words of God
and despised the counsel of the Most High.
So he subjected them to bitter labor;
they stumbled, and there was no one to help.
Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble,
and he saved them from their distress.
He brought them out of darkness
and the deepest gloom and broke away their chains.
Let them give thanks to the Lord for his unfailing love
and his wonderful deeds for men,
for he breaks down gates of bronze and cuts through bars of iron.**

You can begin now to see the structure of this Psalm. In every case a predicament is painted; in their desperation these people then cry out to the Lord; he delivers them, and then they express thanks for that deliverance. Now these are people suffering in iron chains; they are enslaved, and the result is that they are in darkness. Darkness is always a picture of despair in the Old Testament. There are people who have been enslaved by dope, or drugs, or TV, or by some dark mood or thought, by bitterness and resentment. I know a person who has been mad for 20 years--a very even disposition, always mad, and totally conquered by that mood. This is the kind of person being described here in this little vignette. The reason, we are told, is because they "rebelled against the words of God and despised the counsel of the Most High."

Do you realize that sin will enslave you? We would like to maintain the fiction that somehow we can be neutral, but we cannot. We either are the servant of God or we are the servant of sin. We somehow believe that we can get away with a little bit of sin, we can fantasize a little bit about sexual matters, we can cheat a little bit on our income tax, or we can lie in small things. But we cannot, because we do not remain static. Sin snares you and enslaves you, and things go from bad to worse. That is the picture that Paul gives us in Romans 6. You cannot stand still. Sin will conquer you, as with Cain. He just entertained a little bit of irritation toward his brother, and then he killed him. That is what sin will do for you.

So these people who were enslaved by sin "cried to the Lord in their trouble," and we are told, "he saved them from their distress. He brought them out of darkness and the deepest gloom, and he broke away their chains." God does not say, "You did it; now get yourself out of it." He does not say, "It's your problem. You wrecked your marriage, now you work it out." "It was your drinking that broke all those relationships, now you solve it." He does not do that. He comes to the rescue, and he gives us the power to break the chains that bind us. We are told here that he "breaks down gates of bronze and cuts through bars of iron." What God wants us to understand is that he gives us the power to activate our will. Our wills are not paralyzed. There is no reason why we, as sons of God, should be tyrannized by moods and habits, patterns of living and sinful actions and attitudes. We have been set free. We need to act on the freedom that we have, to believe God that he set us free. When we cry out to him for deliverance, he delivers us. I find that more and more people need to understand that God gives us the power to act. Satan would like us to believe that we are impotent, that we cannot act, that we cannot do anything about it, that we are enslaved by a certain habit, but God wants us to know that we are set free. I have been counseling a young homosexual who is really struggling to be set free. The last time we met he said, "I just can't stop," and I said, "No, that's not true. You can. The problem is not that you can't; it is that you won't. You are not willing to go through the struggle and the pain and the anguish that comes when the temptation hits, but you can." That is what God wants us to know. We can. "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." He sets the prisoners free.

The third picture begins in verse 17:

**Some became fools through their rebellious ways
and suffered affliction because of their iniquities.
They loathed all food and drew near the gates of death.
Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble,
and he saved them from their distress.
He sent forth his word and healed them;
he rescued them from the grave.
Let them give thanks to the Lord for his unfailing love
and his wonderful deeds for men.
Let them sacrifice thank offerings
and tell of his works with songs of joy.**

The word that is translated "fools" here means people who have taken leave of their senses, people who have gone insane. Do you know that sin will drive you crazy? The psalmist tells us that these people afflicted themselves "because of their iniquities." They were people who began to feel sorry for themselves, and that self-pity became depression, and they became psychotic because of their failure to deal with their self-pity. Or they were people who had been resentful, angry, hostile, and filled with animosity, and they became neurotic or psychotic because of their sin. A couple of weeks ago a lady was brought into my office. She was the most gracious and loving woman, and I have known her, or known of her, for some time. As we were talking, she leaped to her feet and began to slap her daughter, whom she had never laid a hand on. She grabbed me by the hair of my chin and began to yank on it. She just completely lost her mind, because down underneath was a spirit of bitterness that had been fermenting there for years and it drove her out of her mind. Sin will make you crazy, but the psalmist says there is a way out.

Now people become crazy for many reasons, and one reason is sin. But, he says, "Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and he saved them from their distress. He sent forth his word and healed them. He rescued them from the grave." The word for "grave" here means literally, "pits," something you cannot get out of by yourself. You may think you are beyond reclamation, perhaps no psychiatrist or psychologist can help you, but God says he sends forth his Word and that is what heals. The Word always deals with the root problems. It goes right to the heart of the matter, and it deals with the resentment and bitterness and ugliness inside that has caused the problem in the first place. Now that deliverance may not be immediate, but it is certain if we will begin to align our lives with the Word of God, and let the Word heal us. The result, in verses 21 and 22, is that we can "give thanks to the Lord for his unfailing love and his wonderful deeds for men," and "sacrifice thank offerings and tell of his works

with songs of joy." In other words, he turns our insanity into joy, thanksgiving, health, and wholeness of mind.

The fourth and final picture is in verses 23 through 32:

**Others went out on the sea in ships;
they were merchants on the mighty waters.
They saw the works of the Lord,
his wonderful deeds in the deep.
For he spoke and stirred up a tempest that lifted high the waves.
They mounted up to the heavens and went down to the depths;
in their peril their courage melted away.
They reeled and staggered like drunken men;
they were at their wits' end.
Then they cried out to the Lord in their trouble,
and he brought them out of their distress.
He stilled the storm to a whisper;
the waves of the sea were hushed.
They were glad when it grew calm,
and he guided them to their desired haven.
Let them give thanks to the Lord for his unfailing love
and his wonderful deeds for men.
Let them exalt him in the assembly of the people
and praise him in the council of the elders.**

Ancient man was afraid of the sea. His ships were not really seaworthy, so he normally had to hug the shore. But there were times when he would have to venture out into the open seas, and those were always perilous times. He never knew what would happen. A storm could strike and sink his ship, and yet in order to ply his trade, if he was a merchant, he had to go out on the high seas; there was no other option. He was filled with anxiety and dread because he never knew what would happen out there. A lot of you men are in the same circumstances. Life is very harsh and hard, and your livelihood often depends on decisions you do not make and factors which are beyond your control. Someone will make a decision that you do not know anything about and it can be disastrous for you and your business. Some government official could do something without your knowledge that could ruin you; you have no power over it.

Life is like that. It is like an uncharted sea, and the storms come at the most inopportune times and sink our ship. There is hardly one of us who does not get up some days feeling overcome with anxiety and fear for what may come through the day. I have a young friend up in Boise who is an investor in the real estate business. Back in 1976 and 1977, real estate was moving very well, and almost anyone could make money in it. This young man, he is about 35 years old, started about that time, and borrowed rather heavily and bought a great deal of property. Now he is paying 14% interest on that money, and his lots are not selling. The reasons are beyond his control. One of the areas where his lots are located is up in a part of the county where there are lava flows. The septic tanks are not working properly up there, so a moratorium was declared on building, and, of course, he cannot move his lots there. They have a usury law in Idaho that prevents interest rates rising over 10%, and the prime rate today is higher than that, so the banks are not lending any money. Money is really tight, so builders are not building anything. And this winter we have had one of the most severe winters in history. There is a lot of snow and the ground is frozen about two feet below the snow so nobody is building anything. Here he sits with this marvelous acreage and a huge debt, with high interest payments, and he does not have any income. Now what do you do in a case like that? Well, he said to me, "You know, God sent the weather. God's in control. He's the one who formed that little geological problem up there on the top of that hill." He is hurting; things are tough, but he knows that God did it, and he is restful and trustful through it all.

Now that is what the psalmist tells us in this hymn. In verse 25 we are told it is God who "spoke and stirred up a tempest." God did it. This young man believes that God is good and trustworthy and cares about him even though things are tight. The Scripture says, "cast all of your care upon him because he cares about you." It struck me one day that almost all the pagan religions are based on the fact that men want God to care about them, but scripture

tells us that God already cares. He says, "don't 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, that passes all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus." That is how you make it through the storm.

Verses 33 through 42 are a summation of the Psalmist's theme;

**He turned rivers into a desert, flowing springs into thirsty ground,
and fruitful land into a salt waste,
because of the wickedness of those who lived there.
He turned the desert into pools of water
and the parched ground into flowing springs;
there he brought the hungry to live,
and they founded a city where they could settle.
They sowed fields and planted vineyards that yielded a fruitful harvest;
he blessed them, and their numbers greatly increased,
and he did not let their herds diminish.
Then their numbers decreased,
and they were humbled by oppression, calamity and sorrow;
he who pours contempt on nobles made them wander in a trackless waste.
But he lifted the needy out of their affliction
and increased their families like flocks.
The upright see and rejoice,
but all the wicked shut their mouths.**

He is describing what you and I experience every year of our life: a series of reversals. Life is never the same. There are good days, there are bad days, there are days when we are healthy, and there are days when we are sick. There are days when our children are a delight, and then there are times when they are not. There are times when our business is exciting and challenging, and there are other days when we could not care less. That is the way life is; life is full of reversals. And the psalmist tells us that God is behind it all; he does it all. He is working everything out according to his plan and purpose, and it is good. That is what he wants us to see. We tend to blame God for the trouble we are in, and we attribute evil to him. We say he is not good; God is not treating us right, and we play right into Satan's hands when we do that. Satan wants us to believe that God is not trustworthy, that he does not care about us, that he does not love us, but he does. Even when life is hard, Paul says, he is "working all things out according to his purpose," which is good. He is doing something in our lives; he is doing something in the lives of others. Sometimes we do not know what he is doing. We do not understand why he brings things into our life, but these things come out of his goodness. He has a plan. He knows what he is doing. He is right on target.

My mother used to make hook rugs. As a little boy I would sit on the floor and watch her, and from my perspective, all I could see were the long strings hanging out on the other side. After a while she would turn the rug over and I would see the pattern on the top. All I saw underneath were loose ends. And that is the problem with looking at life from our perspective—all we see are the loose ends. We do not think God knows what he is doing. Why did God give me a child like this, or a mate like this, or a job like this? Why has God allowed my business, or my health, to collapse? Why did he move me out of the area right when I was excited about what was going on? Well, he is good, that is why. His plan is good. He knows what he is doing. We can trust him and believe him and know that he loves us despite what circumstances tell us. Finally, in verse 43 we come to the conclusion that the psalmist has been leading us to:

Whoever is wise, let him heed these things

The word "wise" means skilled about life, able to cope with life. Whoever is skillful at life will give heed to these things,

...and consider the great love of the Lord.

This is what gives us poise in our circumstances, and peace and calm and quietness under pressure. To me the Lord is always the greatest example of someone who was peaceful under pressure because he knew what the Father was about. He trusted the Father implicitly; he knew that the Father was good, that he loved him. One of the best examples of this was in the events that led up to Jesus' trial, when the Roman soldiers went to capture him in the garden. The disciples fled; even the Roman soldiers were in a high state of panic. They did not know what to do, so Jesus sort of organizes the whole thing. He encourages the Roman soldiers, and he gets everything moving in the right direction. Everyone else is falling apart at the seams, but not the Lord Jesus, because he understood the nature of the problem. So when your husband loses his job, or you lose your husband, you can be peaceful and poised, because you know what the Father is about. Or when you break a fingernail, or your hairdresser blows it, or whatever, you can be assured that God knows what he is doing. He is good. He loves you. Or when you make a business decision that does not work out right, God is good. He knows what he is doing. Those that are skillful in life will understand that. As Fanny Crosby put it, "Perfect submission, all is at rest." Those things go together. We are not restful unless we are submissive. If we are not willing to let God be God and love him for what he is, know him for who he is, then we are always upset. But Fanny Crosby, who certainly knew a great deal about suffering, for she was blind, understood. "Perfect submission, all is at rest. I in my Savior am happy and blessed." Maybe not in your circumstances, but in your Savior, in your circumstances, you are happy and blessed-"watching and waiting looking above, filled with his goodness, lost in his love."

Father, give us the courage to let you be God and work things out as you see best. We want to trust you and be restful as you accomplish in us the perfect purpose you have in mind. Thank you for doing that for us. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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