



NO ONE CARES FOR ME

SERIES: GIVE ME AN AUTHENTIC VOICE

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Psalm 142

Second Message

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Writing about the nature of Hebrew poetry in his book *Reading Biblical Poetry*, Jan Fokkelman stated, "Because of their semantic density, poems are often hard to understand."¹ I agree. Books of poetry are often difficult if not impossible for me to wade through. However, books that weave poetry into someone's story are a different matter. Once I know the context of the larger story, the poetic images leap off the page. Today we begin a study in the psalms of David, in particular those that have historical titles that locate them within the David story. Actually there are few historical titles to David's prayers; only fourteen, in fact, plus three that are listed in the books of Samuel. For this series I have chosen seven psalms and placed them in chronological order so that we might trace the shape of David's voice alongside his story.

Understanding the story behind these psalms will bring into sharper focus the images that David utilized. Their horizon becomes even greater when we remember that Israel used the psalms for their prayers. They achieved their highest glory when the Greater David uttered them in his story. But when God merges our story with the story of Christ, these images take on an even fuller sense (Col 1:24). John Felstiner, an English professor at Stanford University, comments that the most that a poem can do is bring four worlds together: the worlds of creation, history, spirituality, and the personal.² When this occurs, a poem can be explosive.

The Shape of David's Voice

A The Voice of Exile: A New Family Found in the Wilderness

The story: 1 Sam 22:1-5

The poem: Psalm 142

B Cornered by a Rebellious King

The story: 1 Sam 24

The poem: Psalm 57

C The Voice of Grief: The Death of a Friend

The story: 1 Sam 31

The poem: 2 Sam 1:17-29

X The Voice of Praise: An Eternal House

The story: 2 Sam 7:1-17

The poem: 2 Sam 7:18-29

C' The Voice of Grief: The Death of a Friend

The story: 2 Sam 11,12

The poem: Psalm 51

B' Cornered by a Rebellious Son

The story: 2 Sam 15

The poem: Psalm 3

A' The Voice of Exile: God Himself Found in the Wilderness

The story: 2 Sam 16

The poem: Psalm 63

Psalm 142 begins, "Maskil of David, when he was in the cave. A Prayer." Caves are prominent in the David story, but because of his use of metaphors of extreme aloneness, most scholars place the context of Psalm 142 as 1 Sam 22:1-5: "So David departed from there and escaped to the cave of Adullam" (1 Sam 22:1a). David had barely escaped when he sought refuge from Saul in Gath (Ps 34). He fled to the cave of Adullam, bereft of family and friends. How ironic that Saul, rejected by the Lord, lived in a palace, while David, God's anointed, had to find refuge in a cave.

In May 1994, together with four friends I went on a mission to find this cave in order to recreate in my imagination what David's experience must have been like. We found the cave of Adullam on the back side of a forested hill. From the hilltop we looked out over the valley of Elah to the west (about four miles from the site of David's battle with Goliath). To the northeast one could see Bethlehem in the distance. Even the tops of the buildings of Jerusalem (about twelve miles away) were visible. This was familiar territory to David. Finding a small opening, we climbed into the cave. As our eyes adjusted to the darkness we saw that it had three or four chambers divided by narrow passageways. The cave could indeed accommodate 400 men and keep them well concealed. Once we entered and descended into the depths of the earth we were immediately engulfed in darkness. It felt like a grave. Adullam was a symbol of rejection for David. He entered that place because there was no other safe place left to him. In that very cave we read Psalm 142, David's cry to God.

I. His Plea³ (142:1-3a)

**I cry aloud with my voice to the LORD;
I make supplication with my voice to the LORD.
I pour out my complaint before Him;
I declare my trouble before Him.
When my spirit was overwhelmed within me,
(Ps 142:1-3a, NASB)**

Some scholars place the first major break (the Greek term is *strophe* or "turning"⁴) at the end of verse 3a (as does the JPS version). This division makes better sense of the grammar and poetic structure.⁵

Of all literary forms, poetry is the most difficult to translate because of its dependence on the sound of words as well as their meaning.⁶ But what comes across clearly in Hebrew poetry is the use of repetition, which scholars call parallelism. The poet makes a statement and then repeats or echoes it, so each verse is made up of what we might call two or three versets (or cola). It is important to note that the repetition is seldom mere repetition; rather, there is usually a subtle but significant development in meaning.⁷ Understanding these differences will help us trace the dynamic movement of David's voice in the psalms.

Now, three observations about David's opening cry. First, notice how intensely personal it is. In each of the five poetic

lines (versets or cola) there are two "I" morphemes ("my voice, I cry; I pour out, my complaint; my spirit, within me," etc). Ten times in two verses the words I, my, or me are used. David is so overwhelmed by his aloneness he has become self-consumed. From this state of extreme vulnerability he begins his prayer. When his spirit has given out and he feels he is about to go over the edge, he gives expression of his voice to God. He doesn't wait until he feels God-centered before he begins his prayer. God always meets us where we are. That is where David begins.

Second, notice that in David's vulnerable state of being disoriented and overwhelmed, God seems distant. This is why David can only speak about God in the third person ("Lord," "Him"). He is not yet able to honestly address God as that personal "You." In his weakness he is admitting that he is not where he wants to be but is willing to begin the journey. Our weakness becomes the starting place of prayer.

Thirdly, as David verbalizes his pain before God his voice becomes more articulate and his passions more acute. We see this in the repetition both of the nouns and the verbs he chooses. The first line of each verse expresses the intensity of his emotion, while the second shapes it, making it more articulate and measured. In verse 1 his loud "cry" (usually from acute distress) is sensitively shaped into an "appeal of grace"; in verse 2 his bold "complaint" is carefully crafted into a detailed account of "distress." The verbs intensify not just within the verses but also between them. The raw emotion of his "cry" in verse 1 is fully spent ("poured out") in verse 2. Hannah's method of praying (1 Sam 1:15) now serves as the model way of prayer for Israel's king. Anguished sorrow must be fully spent before God for David to have the sense that he has been adequately heard. So passion is channeled through carefully structured forms as each poetic line consists of just three [Hebrew] words.⁸

Thus we observe that the repetition of the lines within the poem ("parallelism," the defining element of Hebrew poetry⁹) is hardly ever mere repetition; rather, it contains subtle but significant differences. In these differences we can trace the journey the poet makes within his own soul. For David, there is not only emotional movement, but also spatial progress (seen in the repetition of the prepositions "to the Lord" and "before Him"). In the pouring out of his soul before God, David bridges the psychological distance he feels between himself and God. Having spanned that bridge, he is now ready to look God directly in the eye and address him as a personal friend.

We should never assume that if we are not in a good place, God will not hear our prayers. The starting place in getting to a better place is admitting that we're not in the right place. Remember the prayer of the father of the demon-possessed boy in the gospel of Mark. When Jesus replied that all the father had to do was believe and the impossible would become possible, the man responded honestly, "I do believe; help my unbelief" (Mark 9:24).

II. His Plight (142:3b-4)

[But] You knew [know] my path.

In the way where I walk

They have hidden a trap for me.

Look to the right and see;

For there is no one who regards me;

There is no escape for me;

No one cares for my soul. (142:3b-4)

Having made the all-important journey into God's presence, David now feels free to address God directly with the very personal yet bold "You." Due to the urgency of the situation and the depth of his sorrow, David spends no time with lengthy titles or flattery when addressing God. He knows him well. Now that he has his attention he has no hesitation in expressing the tension within his soul. The second division is as carefully constructed as the first. This reminds us that voicing our emotions with great care makes us supremely human. Here David places two sets of three poetic lines (versets or cola) around a double imperative, "Look...and see!"¹⁰ These images are all visual. It is as if he is saying, "God, now that I have your attention, I want you to take a good look at my situation."

What gives David a freedom that we might consider irreverent is the fact that God had committed himself to him. David was God's representative king on earth; thus if reality seemed contrary to God's promises, God's reputation was at stake. The psalms were not prayers drawn up by individuals merely seeking survival and well-being (*shalom*) in a hostile world. They originated as the prayers of Israel's anointed king ("God's son," Ps 2:7; 2 Sam 7:14) to further God's rule on earth. God's reputation therefore rested on the destiny of this king. In Psalm 2, the coronation psalm later composed for David's lineage, God invited the king to merely "Ask of Me, and I will surely give the nations as Your inheritance, And the very ends of the earth as Your possession" (Ps 2:8). The privilege of prayer was the primary feature that defined the son's (i.e. Israel's king) relationship to the Father. And the answers to those prayers were the Father's vindication of his relationship with the son. This gives insight as to why David's psalms were so essential in shaping the prayers of his greater Son, Jesus. And it gives us warrant to pray these prayers as well, since we are "in Christ," and now are sons of the One Father (Gal 3:26; 4:6).

In that spirit of being considered God's son David freely details his lament before God. To a God who knows all and sees all he points out that the path he is being carried down is a dead-end trap leading to exile. Israel's king, who just earlier had been lauded as a national hero after slaying Goliath, is now a homeless recluse. The painful and repetitive "no one" stings to the bone. At the end of the first *strophe* David was at his end because of personal fatigue. Here he is at an end because when he most needs help there is not one friend to be found. The last phrase, "no one seeks my soul," becomes the nadir of his grief and is the center line of the poem.

Reflecting on how David's prayer must have affected our Lord, I wondered how it might have shaped his expectation for his ministry. When a scribe boasted that he would follow Jesus anywhere, his response was, "The foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head" (Matt 8:20). To live with Christ is to go down the path of exile. I wonder if Jesus saw Judas as the trap hidden in his path through which there was no escape? Did David's images of aloneness prepare Jesus for that dark night in Gethsemane, when he would look to his right and fail to see one friend willing to stand with him and pray through the darkness? Did David give Jesus the insight that he would have to go to the cross alone? It is amazing to see how the anxious, agonized words of David have shaped history. Is this state of feeling utterly lost and alone the gateway through which we all must pass? As the author of Hebrews exhorts, "So, let us go out to Him outside the camp, bearing His reproach. For here we do not have a lasting city, but we are seeking the city which is to come" (Heb 13:13-14).

III. His Portion (142:5-6)

**I cried out to You, O LORD;
I said, "You are my refuge,
My portion in the land of the living.
Give heed to my [ringing] cry,
For I am brought very low;
Deliver me from my persecutors,
For they are too strong for me." (142:5-6)**

Having completed his lament, David now repeats his opening plea. His cry is identical to his first (*za'aq*, a cry of acute distress), but then it develops into a ringing cry (*rinnah*, a loud shout or piercing cry) saturated with a profound sense of weakness ("for I am brought very low") and inadequacy ("for they are too strong for me"). But within the agony something new has occurred. After giving full voice to his pain, God is surprisingly near and personal, and a new confidence is born within David. Through the painful process of being forcefully disconnected from the world his trust is solidified. God alone is his refuge. His soul is now buoyant in the turbulent sea. And, pressed up against the breast of God, he is reoriented with a new understanding of what his inheritance truly entails.

The word portion (*heleq*) was normally used for the divided share of land (or booty from battle) that was a tribe's inheritance within Israel. Every tribe had a portion except the tribe of Levi, since the Levites were specially set apart for God's service. As the Lord spoke to Aaron, "You shall have no inheritance in their land nor own any *portion* among them; I am your *portion* and your inheritance among the sons of Israel" (Num 18:20). Now that David is landless he has the sense that, rather than being disenfranchised, he is actually being promoted by God to this privileged position, like the Levites. This is eternal life at a substantial level. Earthly loss has brought heavenly gain. How ironic, that the pain of prison gives birth to heavenly Presence.

Yet we are instructed that even in the midst of this indescribable sweetness David is keenly aware of the depths of his inadequacy. The term "brought very low" was used of someone miserably poor, powerless, and close to being bankrupt, and therefore extremely vulnerable to injustice. Another graphic image comes from Pharaoh's dream, where it is used to describe the gaunt, emaciated cows in Egypt (Gen 41:19). This mixture of complete trust and severe weakness makes David's cry (*rinnah*) to God more shrill. True spirituality doesn't remove our weakness; it deepens our dependence.

While our Lord was being hunted in Gethsemane his soul was filled with that same strange mixture of complete trust and absolute vulnerability. Thus he spoke to his disciples, "My soul is deeply grieved, to the point of death; remain here and keep watch with Me" (Matt 26:38). Like David, Jesus repeated his request more than once (Matt 26:42,44) in order to acquire the confidence and orientation he needed to cope with the terror that lay ahead.

IV. His Prospect (142:7)

**"Bring my soul out of prison,
So that I may give thanks to Your name;
The righteous will surround me,
For You will deal bountifully with me." (142:7)**

Now David reaches the crowning summit of his prayer. He makes his final request to God to be removed from this lonely prison where he is hemmed in and cut off from family and friends. The verb he uses (*yatza'*, "bring out") is the one most often used to describe God's action in bringing Israel out of

Egypt in the Exodus. Just as Israel was brought out of slavery to worship God on Mount Sinai (Exod 3:12), so David follows the same paradigm. Once God rescues him, it will be his supreme joy to skillfully compose a psalm of thanksgiving detailing the miraculous way God had delivered him. David can't wait for the day when he can proclaim it in the presence of his people, the day when the man who stood so alone will be surrounded by a righteous throng who will worship in his praise.

Right at this juncture, when David articulates his final request, he is given a vision of the future so strong that his inner man glories in it: "For you will deal bountifully with me!" The verb he uses (*gamal*) is one of those pregnant terms that no single English word can fully convey. Here it probably carries the sense that David expects God to benefit him greatly, and as a result he will be vindicated as God's son and representative on earth. Kidner captures it well: "David who dares to visualize the day when he is no longer shunned or hunted, but thronged, or even crowned." Kidner notes that from this word surround (*kathar*) "there arises a word for a royal crown (Est. 1:11; 2:17; 6:8), and a further sense of the verb as 'to crown' (Pr. 14:18)."¹¹ Calvin interpreted the image with this dual sense as well, that "the righteous will not only surround him, but also place a crown on his head." As we learned last week, by honestly articulating his pain, David is mysteriously able to taste the future while still living in the painful present (this is what scholars label as the "confidence" sections in lament psalms).

It did not take long for God to abundantly answer David's prayer. No sooner had he voiced his prayer than this desolate cave was buzzing with life: "So David departed from there and escaped to the cave of Adullam; and when his brothers and all his father's household heard of it, they went down there to him" (1 Sam 22:1).

The family that had initially despised and rejected their youngest is now seeking him. David's brothers and his father's entire household come to identify with him in the cave. Before David can take it all in an even more massive crowd appears on the horizon: "Everyone who was in distress, and everyone who was in debt, and everyone who was discontented, gathered to him; and he became captain over them. Now there were about four hundred men with him" (1 Sam 22:2).

Reading the description of these folk who were stressed out and buried under huge debts and bitter life experiences gives a whole new definition to the term *righteous*! But these are the ones who were mysteriously drawn to this cave in the Judean wilderness, the motley mob who would form the nucleus of the new kingdom. This was a radical redefinition of what the term "family" meant to David. Family would no longer be based on "blood" but on faith in God's commitment to this fugitive king.

David's story would set the paradigm for Jesus. His rejection by his immediate family (Mark 3:21, 31-32; John 7:5) and the nation's leadership created a new family (Mark 3:34-35) whose bonds were stronger than blood. David's voice shapes history!

Back in 1994 as the five of us sat inside the cave and listened to David's voice, I thought of all these worlds coming together in that moment of time, and a darkened pit was transformed into a holy place. How thankful I was that David gave voice to his pain! It would be years later, however, before I would know what effect that voice had on the Father. My greatest longing in life was to be a "son," but my greatest joy is found in being a father. Over the years, as my three

daughters have grown up, I have experienced the indescribable joy of watching God give them a stage to share their voices. What has been especially moving were the occasions when, like David, they were able to speak freely of their pain or rejection and then watch God create a larger family of new relationships for them as they embraced their sorrow. This was the gift that I never expected to receive as a father. Verging on elation I wrote:

This is something not granted
to fathers
angels yes
but not fathers
at least until the day is done
and the night has come
and in that deep oboe sleep
a daughter speaks
of memories of what is gone.

It is then a father hears
that voice
and with it every articulate vowel of memory
everything for which he's been waking waiting
his whole life,
a daughter's voice
his daughter's voice
shaping his dreams while he sleeps.

Who am I
that I should hear such sweet things
while I yet live?

Listening to the voices of my three daughters has given me a taste of how our Heavenly Father is moved when we take time and effort to share our pain with him. These moments have given new meaning to David's phrase describing God as the Holy One who is "enthroned upon the praises of Israel" (Ps 22:3). Remember this: you are not alone in Adullam.

1. J. P. Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Poetry* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 50.

2. This comment was made by John at a lecture on Paul Celan's poem "Es Stand." The poem is in John Felstiner, *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 268.

3. These titles are taken from Derek Kidner, *Psalms 73-150* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1975), 473-474.

4. On the meaning of *strophe*, Fokkelman comments, "So the poet turns and turns: in tone, genre, pace, address (from 3rd to 2nd grammatical person, e.g. speaking to God instead of about Him), verbal tenses, moods (indicative, calling, wishing, commanding, praying), or subject matter. The result being that in more than 95% of cases the *strophe* is either a unit of two or of three full poetic lines." Quoted from a personal letter from the author.

5. This division makes better grammatical sense and poetic unity. The first *strophe's* "special characteristic is that each colon contains two I-morphemes... Strophe 2 makes its opening with an emphatic 'you' and places its cola in two threesomes around a double imperative." J.P. Fokkelman, *Major Poems of the Hebrew Bible*, Vol. II (Assen: Van Gorcum, 2000), 307.

6. Northrop Frye comments on different magical qualities of poetry that seem to capture people, such as some "will seize on assonances and inner harmonies, such as Poe's much admired line, 'the viol, the violet, and the vine.' In the Bible the last quality of texture would be particularly significant for the Hebrew scholar able to respond to the flickering and dancing of pun and assonance in the Hebrew text." Northrop Frye, *Words with Power* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1990), 114.

7. On the dynamics of Biblical parallelism see Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 3-26.

8. Fokkelman points out that the entire poem is structured with great regularity, since "20 of the 23 cola contain three words." Fokkelman, *Major Poems*, 307.

9. For a historic study on Biblical parallelism see James Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry, Parallelism and Its History* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1981).

10. This is Fokkelman's observation. Fokkelman, *Major Poems*, 307.

11. Derek Kidner, *Psalms 73-150*, 474.

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