

Salvation is in God's Hands Alone

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[0 : 00] The following message is given by Walt Alexander, lead pastor of Trinity Grace Church in Athens, Tennessee. For more information about Trinity Grace, please visit us at TrinityGraceAthens.com.

! Lord, how many are my foes?

Many are rising against me. Many are saying of my soul, there is no salvation for him in God. But you, O Lord, are a shield about me.

My glory and the lifter of my head. I cried aloud to the Lord and he answered me from his holy hill.

I lay down and slept. I woke again for the Lord sustained me. I will not be afraid of many thousands of people who have set themselves against me all around.

[1 : 22] Arise, O Lord. Save me, O my God. For you strike all my enemies on the cheek. You break the teeth of the wicked.

Salvation belongs to the Lord. Your blessing be on your people. May God bless preaching of his word.

Every song has a story. And often the story brings the song to life. You know, perhaps there's no greater song that we sing that has a better story behind it than this song, It Is Well.

No doubt a song you've probably heard. It's written by Horatio Spafford. Horatio Spafford and his wife lived in Chicago back in the 1800s. And he was an attorney there.

And in 1871, a great fire in Chicago destroyed much of his business. But then two years later, his wife and daughters were traveling across the ocean by boat.

[2 : 23] When their boat was struck and their boat sank and each of his children died. Only his wife survived.

They say nine days later, she telegraphed Horatio, her husband, with the words, Saved alone. What shall I do? Mr. Spafford departed immediately on the next ship to find his wife.

And on the way, they passed through the waters where the ship had sunk and his daughters drowned. And as they did, Mr. Spafford wrote the words to It Is Well. I mean, it brings that song to life, does it?

When peace like a river attendeth my soul, when sorrows like sea billows roll, whatever my lot, thou hast taught me to say, it is well. It is well with my soul.

And I just love it because It Is Well is not the cold meditation of someone in the fair winds of life. It's the meditation of someone caught in the waves of agony, reaching out for something to hold.

[3 : 30] And that just makes me want to sing that song. We've got it in the back story, brings it to life so that I can add my voice and sing with all my heart and sing to my anchor in the agonies of life.

And this morning, we come to a song, a psalm with a most insightful back story. The psalm is the first psalm in the whole psalter with a subscript.

If you look down there with me, I didn't read it when we began, but there it is. A psalm of David when he fled from Absalom, his son. Now, subscripts like this were not in the original text, but they've been preserved by translators for hundreds of years, thousands of years, and they're believed to be very reliable.

And this subscript tells us a story. It tells us that David, the king, wrote these words after he fled Jerusalem, where his throne was, from Absalom, and how he was rescued by God.

And the story just brings this psalm to life. As we work through it, you're going to see. Have we seen the past several weeks? We've seen, and we talked about David being the king of Israel, and he ruled over Israel.

[4 : 37] He was a man after God's own heart, you remember? And the Lord went and found him. He led the people in worshiping God. He led the people into prosperity, into peace. He took out the Philistines just numerous times and laid them out.

But he fails at home, if you remember. And everything begins to unravel there. 2 Samuel 15 and 16 and 17 tells us about this.

One son rapes one of his daughters. Another son kills that son. That son, Absalom, is the one who slowly deceives the king and wins over the hearts of Israel until he finally runs David out of town and becomes king.

This psalm is not written from the perch of a throne. This psalm. This psalm is written from the path of wilderness as David runs through the night away from his own son.

It's a song of lament. And we know, we've talked about this. One-third of the book of Psalms are laments. They're just prayers to pray when life goes sideways. They kind of fit in this season of our life.

[5 : 48] But it's David's cry of anguish, running and hiding from those, hunting for his life. And it takes us behind the details that 2 Samuel talks about. It takes us into his fears, his faith, and his prayers to God.

But that's not all. It mounts with confidence in God's salvation. So in a word, where we're going is salvation is in the Lord's hands from the first day to the end. Salvation is in the Lord's hands from the first day until the end.

We're going to break this out. Three points. The first one, the problem of trouble. The problem of trouble. And we just got through Psalm 1 and 2. If you weren't here and you want to listen to those, those are up on our website.

But Psalm 1 tells us how to live privately before the Lord. You remember like your man, like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season. Because you're meditating on the Lord day and night.

That's your private light. And then Psalm 2 took us into our public life. That we are to align our lives with the King Jesus. And it's not with any political platform that might be popular right now.

[6 : 49] And both of the Psalms talk about trouble. They talk about the wicked prosper. And they talk about the wicked doing this or that. But they talk about trouble in general. But in Psalm 3, trouble gets specific.

That's what's going on in this Psalm. Trouble moves from black and white to color. Trouble moves from general categories to specific enemies.

And that's what David is facing. And the greatest problem of trouble, what we're going to see, is that it seems to give us no way out. So trouble is closing in on David.

Look back there with me in verses 1 and 2. How many are my foes. Many are rising against me. Many are saying of me. He's being surrounded by this trouble.

These foes are rising up. They're enemies and they're making known their wickedness and their enemy to him by rising up against him and threatening him.

[7 : 46] This trouble is moving closer and closer. And in so many ways, this is to be, it's like a claustrophobic type of Psalm. You know, I'm one of these people. I don't like being tight places.

And I don't like people being too close to me. Except my family. One friend recently suggested that during these awkward days of coronavirus that we should wear a color-coded sticker to let people know how close we're going to get.

Right? Like a hugger. You know, if you're a hugger, you just announce it. I don't know what that would be. Some bright yellow. Come on. You can see it. It's blinking almost. And you hug. Or maybe you handshake.

Maybe that's blue. Or whatever the color is. Or maybe you just wave. Or maybe you head nod. I told my friend, I'd like to wear a head nod for life. I'm going to take this after corona because I'm not a hugger.

But trouble gets too close here. Trouble is moving to an uncomfortable distance for David.

[8 : 48] He says it's threatening my soul. Look down there. Verse 3, many are saying of my soul. You know, the soul is not merely his heart or something like that. The soul is the deepest core of who he is.

His most deeply held beliefs and desires and hope. The idea is trouble is not just closing in and threatening him physically. Trouble is beginning to undo his hope in God.

Which is the most dangerous thing trouble can do. You know, the many, many enemies here are all the people who turned against their king. If you go back and read those, they're all the people that forgot that David slayed Goliath.

That David wiped out the Philistines. That he delivered them again and again. All the people that are rising up that he's talking about here are his people. They're also the people that chased him out of town with hurling insults and rocks.

Telling him to get lost. And the hardest part of it was not the people. But was that he began to believe that God was through with him too. Look at what they say.

[9 : 59] There's no salvation for him and God. And David begins to believe it. David left Jerusalem. Not primarily. Because he believed Absalom was the true king.

David left Jerusalem because he believed God no longer wanted him as king. David's encounter with Shimei sums this up so well. When David enters a certain town, Shimei comes out and throws stones at him.

And rocks at him. And says, get out of here. You man of blood. You worthless man. The Lord has given your kingdom to Absalom. And one of David's men does what every one of David's men should have done in this moment.

He says, what is this dead dog cursing the king doing? I'll take his head off. But listen to what David said. If he's cursing me, it's because the Lord has told him to.

David had lost hope. David had begun to believe there is no relief, no risk, and no rescue for him in God. The greatest part and the greatest problem of trouble is that it closes in on us and leaves us stuck.

[11 : 08] What depletes and discourages us in trouble is not trouble, but the moment that we begin to believe there's no hope ahead.

Maybe it's the sinking feeling of striking out for the third straight time and the thoughts that begin to fly around your head. You don't have what it takes. More practice is not going to make a difference.

Maybe it's the cold shoulder from your husband. And again, when all day long you'd hoped he would talk to you tonight. Some things will never change. Maybe it's stumbling in the same old way.

This is my trouble. The same old way. Losing my temper again. Lashing out with hurtful words again. Running up the credit card again. And whatever it is, trouble so often leaves you stuck.

I hate that word. Stuck in this town. Stuck with this body. Stuck with this lame, awkward personality. Stuck in this dead-end job. Stuck with this broken marriage.

[12 : 04] What do you do when you're stuck? That's what's going on with David. David's stuck. Thanks be to God. He doesn't stay there, which is what we must see.

Point two, the perspective of faith. The perspective of faith. One author, Paul Tripp, says you are in an unending conversation with yourself.

You are talking to yourself all the time, interpreting, organizing, and analyzing what's going on inside you and around you. Now, maybe you don't think about yourself as a self-talker.

Or maybe you don't read out the recipes or whatever you're doing to yourself. But maybe you're just talking to yourself about how tired you feel after the last several weeks or after the long hours of COVID-19.

Or maybe you're just talking to yourself about that mental to-do list that begins. As soon as you wake up in the morning, I've got to cut the grass. I've got to gather groceries. I've got to begin to do these things. Or maybe you're talking to yourself about the good old days when life was simpler and summer nights didn't include masks, you know.

[13 : 11] But how do you talk to yourself when you're stuck? There's a way to talk to yourself when you're stuck in trouble that doesn't change the conversation.

There's a way of talking to yourself when you're stuck in trouble that just drones on with the same thing. That just circles the problem again. And again.

And again, rehearses the reasons why it's perfectly clear that God is through. That there's no way out. That no one cares. That you should never look up.

Kind of like Charlie Brown. Always moping and mumbling and moaning about hopeless life is because of all your problems. I read a great Charlie Brown quote this week.

He said, there ought to be better ways of starting the day than having to get up. I mean, I can totally relate to that. And Charlie Brown, he just lives that all day long.

[14 : 11] But when you're stuck in trouble, faith must speak. And change the way you talk to yourself. And I love this. Look down at verse 3. The psalm is a lament to God.

But before David talks to God, he talks to himself. Before David prays to God, he talks to himself. Look down there in verse 3.

But you, O Lord. But you. Yes, there are foes surrounding me, rising up against me, threatening me. But that is not all there is.

David doesn't circle the problem again. David turns to the Lord. But you, O Lord. O Yahweh, as we talked about last night. He reminds himself of who the Lord is.

He says, you are my defense. You know, this psalm is just loaded with military language. They're rising up against me. Many are my foes. But you are a shield about me. Shields just covered your face and maybe your chest.

[15 : 10] But this shield covers all the way down. Covers me completely. It's the only help I need. You're my defense, he says. You're my boast.

You know, David was run out of town. And the biggest part of being run out of town was not merely the trouble that came at him, but being dishonored and disrespected by the people he rescued.

He's the king. He's the Lord's anointed. But he says, you know, Lord, you're my glory. You're my boast. You're all that I need. Men may mock me and ridicule me and stone me, but you have loved me and you've called me to an eternal purpose.

It doesn't matter. I'm sitting on a throne in Jerusalem. I'm living for the king. I love you. You're my glory. That's what it means.

You're all I want. You're my everything. You're the lifter of my head. You're my restorer. You know, one of the most repeated requests in the whole book of Psalm is let not my enemies triumph over me.

[16 : 13] Now, the point of that is not merely like let me win, you know, or something like that. The point is let not those who ridicule you be proven right.

Let me not be put ashamed. Let me let not my head be bowed down. Let not those who point at me and laugh be proven right. You know, to lift your head is arrogant.

Lift your own head is arrogant. Just ask Herod who was eaten by worms. But to wait on God to lift your head is gutsy faith. And that's what David does. He's not working out his circumstances.

He's waiting on God to work him out. And then he says, you're my refuge. Look in verse 4. He says, I cried aloud to the Lord and he answered me from his holy hill. Hill.

That holy hill we learned about in chapters 1 and 2. Several years ago I read a book called The Flag of Our Fathers. I am a kind of a history lover.

[17 : 12] And this book is about the Pacific Theater of World War II. And in that book James Bradley tells the story of the famous photograph of the Marines raising the flag over Iwo Jima.

You probably know the photograph I'm talking about, leaning at about a 45 degree angle as they pressed that flag up on the volcano of Iwo Jima. The picture went viral, as viral as it can go in 1945.

But we all saw it. And so it went very viral. It appeared in newspapers throughout the United States as a symbol of freedom in the ending of a very costly battle in World War II.

Perhaps no battle more costly than outside of Normandy. It was printed in the local paper that Ed Block was reading in his childhood home while on leave from the Air Force.

So Ed, down in Texas, is reading an article with this picture flopped out on the kitchen table. And as he was reading, his mother walked by, paused to look at the picture, and said, That's my boy holding the pole.

[18 : 19] Ed was like, Mom, what are you talking about? And talked back to his mom like no boy should do. He said, How can you tell? You can only see his back. And we don't even know if Harlan, my brother, your son, we don't even know if Harlan is on Iwo.

She simply responded, I know my boy. Days later, the papers identified the man as Henry Hanson. Not her boy.

But nearly two years later, after more stories were told, the family was notified of a correction. It was, in fact, Harlan Block. Holding the end of the pole down into the ground, confirmed by numerous eyewitnesses on Iwo.

No doubt Miss Block wasn't surprised. I know my boy. What David is saying in these verses is, I know my Lord.

I'm not caving in. That's what he's shown us, the life-altering perspective of faith. I'm not caving in. This story is not over.

[19 : 35] I'm turning my faith to the Lord. And we just got to look at two quick verses on faith. Hebrews 11 says, Without faith it is impossible to please God. For whoever would please God must, or whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists.

And he rewards those who seek them. So we would naturally ask, What is faith then? And Hebrews 11.1 says, Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.

And so the idea is just what she believed, just what David believed, is faith is refusing to believe the press. That God is dead. That the story is over. That the end is written.

That God is not working. Faith is the refusal to believe that ultimately you're stuck. Faith is the conviction of things not seen. I love that definition.

What it means is that faith refuses to view the invisible in light of the visible, concluding God is done. Faith insists on viewing the visible in light of the invisible, expecting God to work.

[20 : 35] You see what he's saying? Faith refuses to view the invisible in light of the visible, judging God because of these circumstances and how they don't seem to be working out. Faith insists on viewing the visible in light of the invisible, expecting God to work.

The idea is faith never rests. Faith waits. Hopes. Looks. Longs. Insists that things are not over because God is working.

Faith is not a leap in the dark. Faith's a hope-filled conviction that God will not stop and that we must not stop waiting until we're satisfied with good.

And faith, in this text, is asking us, how are we talking to ourselves? Do you circle your problems? Or do you circle the promises of God?

Do you circle your problems? Kind of like you're walking around Jericho? Are we circling the promises of God? Are you waiting and hoping on the Lord?

[21 : 40] You know, in so many ways, we give a lot of time for our worries. If anything, COVID-19 has shown us as a society. We give a whole lot of time to our worries. We give a whole lot of time to our fear.

There is no exhaustion in reading stuff to educate our worries. But how are we doing giving time to our faith? Are we checking in on the retirement accounts every day?

Are we checking all the latest updates on COVID night? Rehearsing everything against us? If we're doing all that, how much time are we giving to building our faith? You know, faith is not an app to download.

It's a flame to be fired. To be fanned. To be stoked. One of the great hymn writers of the 1700s, since we're talking about hymns today, was a man named William Cooper.

You've sung some of his hymns. But the story, I think, of how he became to be a great hymn writer is so moving. William Cooper came to live with Pastor John Newton, who wrote Amazing Grace, in Olney, England.

[22 : 50] Cooper was mentally ill. Cooper was depressed, had attempted suicide three times. But Newton took him in, took special care of him.

On top of caring for his own family and caring for his church, Newton says that for 12 years, listen to this, for 12 years, he rarely spent more than seven hours away from Cooper.

For 12 years. Every day. He spent with Cooper. During this season, Newton gave Cooper some surprising homework.

He told him they were going to write hymns together. Week after week, they began writing hymns, not primarily, not mainly to serve the church, but to direct his thoughts to God.

And to direct his faith to God. I just love that. Newton, I mean, Cooper didn't set out to be a great hymn writer. Newton set him out to set his thoughts right about God.

[23 : 58] And Cooper went on to write, God moves in a mysterious way. He went on to write, there is a fountain filled with blood. Oh, I just want to sing that right now.

And oh, what we need so often when we're stuck is not a good shrink. Often what we need when we're stuck is to press on more deeply into what we know about God. To turn off the headlines and turn to the Lord.

Cooper's funeral service several years after that, Newton said, He suffered much here for 27 years, but eternity is long enough to make amends for it all. For what is all he endured in this life when compared with the rest which remains for the children of God?

Faith speaks. And changes the conversation. Often faith changes us before it changes the trouble.

And I just love this. Look down at verse 5 and 6. And he prays aloud, then he lays down and sleeps. Reminds me of my Lord in the boat. I woke again for the Lord's sustenance.

[25 : 07] I'm not going to be afraid of many thousands of people who have set themselves against me. The idea is the Lord didn't take out his enemies before he slept. Most likely he's not going to take yours out. The Lord didn't quiet the storm before he found rest.

The Lord didn't solve all his problems before he gave him peace. The Lord will do the same thing for us. That's incredible. Point 3, the prayer of salvation. After all that build up, David begins to pray in verses 7 and 8.

He says, Arise, O Lord, save me. O my God, for you strike all my enemies on the cheek. You break the teeth of the wicked. Salvation belongs to the Lord. Your blessing be on your people.

And you just notice the deep confidence with which he prays at the end of this psalm. He says, Arise. The idea is my enemies have risen against me. But Lord, if you just arise, it will all go away.

The mouse will play when the cat's away. And that's kind of the same image that's going on. Lord, if you just raise up your head and they are all gone. Then he says, save me.

[26 : 09] And this word is this word for salvation. We see it down there in verse 2. Now we see it in verse 7. And then we see it again in verse 8. And it's obviously a word in the Old Testament for relief, for deliverance, for rescue.

But interestingly, one of the core meanings is delivering us from restriction, from confinement, from closing in walls. That's what's going on here.

He's saying, give me room to breathe and to fear and to love you and worship you. And I love the confidence behind this prayer. Save me. Save me.

You know, sometimes we pray. We pray, if it's willing, Lord, if it's okay, if you can work it into your schedule, will you help me out? And I think the psalmist is trying to tell us, don't pray like that.

We're to take our request before the Lord and say, pray, save me. Lord, I know your will. I'm not praying if the Lord wills. I know your promise that the righteous will never go hungry.

[27 : 10] So please give me work and give me permission. Lord, I'm counting on you to work. I'm not waiting around. I'm not asking for permission. You've granted me permission. I know that you're a good father.

So give me a close friend, Lord. Restore the joy to my marriage. Place a longing for you in my children. Lord, I'm not asking for permission. If the Lord wills or when the Lord wills, I'm crying out to you because you're the only person I can cry out to that can rescue me.

But don't pray if the Lord wills. We already know that. You know what he wills. This is the same God who rejoices in doing good to you, who delights over you with singing, who withholds nothing good from you.

Psalms 84 says, oh my God, he continues, save me. Oh my God. Notice the dramatic transition in verse 2. There's no salvation for him in God.

Now he says, save me, oh my God. No salvation for him. Save me, oh my God. You strike all my enemies. Then he turns from just a mere prayer to an expectation.

[28 : 21] This is the Lord. He's going to deliver me. I'm not asking for something any longer. I'm putting all my confidence in him. I'm expecting him to work. And the Lord loves that.

Expect great things from God. Attempt great things for God. That's what the missionary said. And he fittingly concludes, salvation belongs to the Lord.

Salvation belongs to the Lord. No one else's hands are allowed to be involved. It's the Lord alone who rescues, redeems, and restores.

Steve Jobs was quite famous for his role at Apple. Bringing us Apple computers and flipping the phone world upside down with the invention of the iPhone.

But the end of his life was deeply sad. In the fall of 2011, a previously treated pancreatic tumor came back and Jobs faced death.

[29 : 29] He resigned from Apple immediately and began to expect the end of his life eventually. He said, and I quote, At this moment, lying on the bed, sick and remembering all my life, I realize that all my recognition and wealth that I have is meaningless in the face of imminent death.

You can hire someone to drive a car for you, make money for you, but you cannot rent someone to carry the disease for you. One can find material things, but there is one thing that cannot be found when it is lost.

Life. No, Mr. Jobs. Life cannot be found by man when it's lost. Because only God can save.

Tim Keller says salvation belongs to God alone. To no one else. If someone is saved, it is wholly God's doing. It's not a matter of saving you partly and you saving yourself partly.

No, God saves us. We do not and cannot save ourselves. It's the gospel. You know, in so many ways, in the end, God's deliverance of David from Absalom, which he does do.

[30 : 53] Absalom gets caught in a tree, which is a totally great story in the Old Testament. God delivers him from Absalom and his wicked schemes, but all that points together to a greater deliverance for us in Jesus Christ.

The gospel tells us that we all, by nature, are children of wrath, that we've inherited corruption from Adam, that we're guilty before God and helpless before God, to wipe off, rinse off, wash off the stain and guilt on our own, and to make ourselves right before God.

But what we could not do, the Bible says that God did in Jesus Christ. There is therefore now no condemnation in Christ Jesus, for the law of the sin and death.

We've been set free from the law of sin and death, through Jesus Christ, who did what the law weakened by the flesh, could not do by sending his Son in the likeness of simple flesh, and for sin and condemning sin in the flesh through him.

So in so many ways, we rejoice this morning, not merely being saved through earthly enemies, and saved through COVID and worldly troubles, but saved from the wrath of God that remains for those who refuse to repent of their sins.

[32 : 04] Christ said, the wrath of God remains on anyone who doesn't turn to him, and so too it remains for us. But salvation belongs to the Lord.

There's no one who cries his name that is not delivered from his wrath and given the greatest gift of life, which is eternal. Salvation is in the Lord's hands.

For the first day to the end, if you're not right with the Lord Jesus Christ, I want to invite you this morning. There is a judgment day coming. Some say it's coming very soon because of all that's going on in our culture. I don't know about that.

We're not going to talk about that today. But it is coming, and Jesus Christ will sit on that judgment seat, and he will judge the living from the dead, separating out the wheat from the chaff and the sheep from the goats, that he might invite those who've repented of their sins and turn to Jesus Christ to life.

Salvation is in the Lord's hands. Just over 30 years after burying his friend, William Cooper, John Newton died. John Newton, as I said, wrote the greatest hymn in the history of the Christian church, Amazing Grace.

[33 : 14] Wrote about a grace that found him on his hell-bound race, on a slave ship. But I love the story of his final words. He said, I quote, You know, my memory is nearly gone, but I remember two great things.

One, I am a great sinner. And two, that Christ is a great Savior. That boils down very simply all that we believe.

We are great sinners, but Christ is an exceedingly great Savior. Let us pray. Father in heaven, we cast ourselves upon you, we humble ourselves before you, we admit our need for you.

Lord, we refuse to run to anyone or anything else for rescue, we run to you alone. We realize our guilt is against you, and therefore we need you to come and set things straight.

So we call on you, rejoice in you. Lord, we thank you that we have been justified by the blood of Jesus Christ, and much more wonderfully than that, we've been saved from the wrath of God.

[34 : 30] It was our sin that held him there until all the wrath of God was poured out and salvation was accomplished. So we rest in you, we rejoice in you, we live for you alone.

And this morning, Lord, we give you thanks. In Jesus' name. You've been listening to a message given by Walt Alexander, lead pastor of Trinity Grace Church in Athens, Tennessee.

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