

Psalm 107

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Please turn to Psalm 107 as we continue our series in the Psalms this summer. Looking at this Psalm, which is a combination of several different kinds of Psalms, it is a Thanksgiving psalm. It has narrative, but it's also a wisdom psalm. It's unattributed meaning we don't know who the human author is, but we know that God is the one who has inspired it. Most scholars believe it's post-exilic, meaning it was written after the exiles returned to Jerusalem, because verse 3 is likely referring to that return of God's people from the lands, from the east, from the west, from the north and from the south. But ultimately, it's prophetic, and it has in view the eternal gathering in Revelation 5 and 7 that we just sang about the great multitude from every tongue, tribe, and nation, all of God's redeemed people through Christ gathered to praise him. This is the Word of God. We're going to read verses 1-3 and then again verses 33 to the end of the chapter. Please pay careful attention.

Oh, give thanks to the Lord, for he is good. For his steadfast love endures forever. Let the redeemed of the Lord say so whom he has redeemed from trouble, and gathered from the lands, from the east and from the west. From the north and from the south.

He turns rivers into a desert, springs of water into thirsty ground. A fruitful land into a salty waste. Because of the evil of its inhabitants, he turns a desert into pools of water, a parched land into springs of water. And there he lets the hungry dwell, and they establish a city to live in. They sow fields and plant vineyards and get a fruitful yield. By his blessing they multiply greatly, and he does not let their livestock diminish. When they are diminished, they are brought low and brought low through oppression, evil and sorrow. He pours contempt on princes and makes them wander in trackless wastes. But he raises up the needy out of affliction and makes their families like flocks. The upright see it and are glad, and all wickedness shuts its mouth. Whoever is wise, let him attend to these things. Let them consider the steadfast love of the Lord.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Please be seated.

Years ago, my sister in law had a great interest in theater, and although it didn't become her career, she enjoyed acting in local plays, in little theater and other productions in Saint Louis, and she was quite good at it. She had a flair for the dramatic, naturally, and so she was very good at what she did. And as she had differing roles, we would go and see her and I remember her recounting the. The first time she got a pretty big role, a role in a big production that was significant. Though the role itself was small, she was excited and she studied and she looked at her lines and she made sure she understood the staging, that she was in the right place at the right time. The play was called The Madwoman of Chaillot, and she was playing a girl who sold flowers in the market. Opening night came. She was in the right place at the right time, and her line arrived. "Violets, sir?" and she was done. I said it was a small role. She had one line, just one thing to say. And she was committed to saying it well.

In 107:1-2 We also have an incredibly important line to speak. ***O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever. Let the redeemed of the Lord say so whom he has redeemed from trouble, and gathered in from the lands, from the east and from the west, from the north and from the south.*** What we have been charged to say is really simple. ***The Lord is good, and his steadfast love endures forever.*** This saying so is in fact the testimony of the redeemed. And that testimony is essentially a testimony of thanksgiving. And it's an easy line to remember and easy to say. Glibly. But whether we rest in faith or fear, whether we cultivate gratitude or greed, or whether we grow in wisdom or bitterness rests upon our. Regularly, intentionally and obediently giving thanks for and recounting who God is and what he does for his people. Very simply put, if in fact we have known his redeeming grace, we must give thanks for God's steadfast love. What the psalmist does here is specifically qualify and even quantify God's goodness to tell us a foundational truth about his character. Specifically, the Lord is good. Because of his steadfast love, his hesed. Now we've heard that word used before. I'm sure hesed is a rich word that no single English word can really capture in its fullness. It's a steadfast, loyal covenant love rooted in that covenant loyalty of God and His commitment to us. It describes the nature of God's love steadfast, merciful, enduring forever. All of this is essentially what should be in our minds when we say the simple phrase, God is love, and there's nothing passive about this steadfast love, which is precisely why it ought to be the main topic of our conversation. What we talk about, what we say so about. We are the very ones he has redeemed from trouble and gathered in from the lands. Hence this refrain. Verses 8, 15, 21 and 31. Let them the redeemed of the Lord. Thank the Lord for his steadfast love, for his wondrous works to the children of men. And ultimately, that wondrous work is the work of salvation and redemption. Now, the beauty of Psalm 107 is that it provides various settings or vignettes in which God's goodness and steadfast love are demonstrated. Settings in which those redeemed from trouble find themselves. There are four of them.

- First, we have in verses 4-6, *some wandered in desert wastes*
- Verses 10-14, *some sat in darkness and in the shadow of death.*
- Verses 17-20. *Some were fools through their sinful ways.*
- And finally, in the 4th vignette, *some went down to the sea in ships doing business on the great waters*, verses 23 through 28.

But these vignettes are not primarily referenced to specific historical or material circumstances or situations. Yet the Bible is full of examples of these that we can even bring to mind that are similar that we know did happen in history. Joseph. We think of even the Lord Jesus himself, the Apostles. Paul in prison. Yeah. The first vignette itself even calls to mind Israel and their wanderings in the desert, literally. But the biblical account of their wandering just as clearly shows us that they're wandering and the many difficulties they experience were because, as verse eleven says in the second vignette, they had rebelled against the words of God and spurned the counsel of the Most High. But even further, in the third vignette, the Israelites clearly suffered the consequences, as verse seven says, that they were fools through their sinful ways because of their iniquities. And finally, no one would dispute that the sum of

their tragic situation, all those years of wandering, was sort of like a ship tossed on a stormy sea. As verse twenty six says in the final vignette, their courage melted away in their evil plight. They reeled and staggered like drunken men and were at their wits end.

What's interesting is that the word *trans* here, some in the ESV in each of these vignettes, isn't actually in the Hebrew, but was supplied by translators as a way of differentiating the vignettes. But the King James better captures the sense. I want you to see this, for example. Verse four in the King James simply states. They wandered in the wilderness in a solitary way. They found no city to dwell in. Then verse ten. Such as sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, being bound in affliction and iron. Verse seventeen. Kind of strikes a universal tone, flatly stating. Fools, because of their transgression and because of their iniquities are afflicted. I love that. Finally, verses twenty three and twenty four read, they that go down to the sea in ships that do business in great waters. These see the works of the Lord, and the wonders in his wonders in the deep. Now using the King James here, of course, you know, I'm not trying to say there's some defection in the ESV. The King James was good news for seventeenth century man, there's no question about that. And it's a great translation, but we're in the 21st century, and the ESV is a good translation. But setting those things as they are show us that they really are describing perhaps the same kinds of things that happen to everyone pictured differently. And we can easily identify with these images as they're used in each vignette ourselves. They're a vivid representation, a description of how we have struggled in the past or even now struggle with our own sins.

So it's best to understand these vignettes, I believe, as a collective metaphor that symbolizes the multiple impacts and consequences of both personal sin and of living in a sinful world. That is the trouble that God redeems his people from. I love what Old Testament scholar Bruce Watkins says. Obviously, we can be metaphorically, not historically lost and starving in a desert and almost shipwrecked at the same time. But the hinge of each of these vignettes is the response of those suffering in the midst of the settings. Verses six, thirteen, nineteen, and twenty eight all say, then they cried to the Lord in their trouble. And these cries are basically the dual expression of repentance and faith. By God's grace in their hearts, those in distress considered the goodness and steadfast love of God, and turned in the humility and dependence of faith in repentance to him. And the result from him in each of these cases is always the same. In verses six, thirteen, nineteen, and twenty eight, he delivered them from their distress. The word translated trouble in verse two and in verses six, thirteen, nineteen, and twenty eight has in some cases been rendered as adversity or even foe. But trouble does capture the sense not only of a present difficulty, but also of pending doom. That the present difficulty threatens to destroy the one experiencing it. And those threats, whether they're physical or they're spiritual or often all too real. But the Lord is the Redeemer in them all, and it is our thanksgiving and praise for that deliverance from trouble, whatever the situation may be for which we give thanks in the steadfast love of God that finds us first in our lostness. Verses four through nine. Some wandered in desert wastes, finding no way to a city to dwell in. Hungry and thirsty, their soul fainted within them. Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble. And he delivered them from their distress. He led them by a straight way till they reached a city to dwell in. Now this trouble resonates deeply in us, because the fear or real remembrance of

actually being lost or wandering with no end of that wandering in sight is pretty terrifying if it's ever happened to you. Now, I'm not talking about the kind of loss when your wife turns to you when you're driving and says, we're lost, aren't we? No, I'm not talking about that. I'm talking about the real disorientation and anxiety of realizing you are in a place where you can find no way out. And worse, no one is likely going to be able to find you if something happens. Have you ever been in a place like that?

Some years ago, our family got caught up watching this show called *I Shouldn't Be Alive*. Maybe some of you remember that. In it, people recounted desperate situations from which they survived and were rescued. I mean, outlandish things. When you watch it, you think they shouldn't be alive. I remember one situation in which someone they were always in places they really shouldn't have been in a logging road, one lane road in the midst of thousands of acres in the wilderness, plunging off the road into the ravine, down at the bottom, two legs broken, car upside down. No one can see them. No cell service. They shouldn't be alive or one situation. A guy was in a thin tent at fourteen thousand feet on some craggy peak in a blizzard with zero visibility. He shouldn't be alive. And yet here they were on this show, recounting, saying so, as it were, they had been rescued by some amazing miracle. Well, certainly God is the one who saved those people who were literally lost in the wilderness, and certainly also in the Bible. We know there are those situations that literally happen, and God redeemed them. And whether someone recognizes that or not is irrelevant. God is the one who finds us in our lostness. But you can see the spiritual analogy so clearly and we feel it. I'd be shocked if there is someone here who has never experienced a spiritual wandering, a disorientation and anxiety in which you feel aimless, as if you just go in circles. Maybe you've lost, or longing for meaning and significance and wonder if God is really paying attention. You may even be there right now. And that repeated phrase in this psalm is not merely a report of past happening. It really is.

The Psalms psalmist's urgent plea to anyone who is wandering in this way lost to cry out, Oh God, help! It's this true cry that God hears and offers deliverance from our spiritual wandering and despair through faith in Christ, who not only gives our lives direction by leading us on a straight way. As the verse says, ultimately to the eternal city of God is our dwelling place. But also, as verse nine says, Christ satisfies our longing, hungry soul, filling us with good things. And at that deliverance the redeemed give thanks for the steadfast love of God. And they say so. Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now I'm found. Was blind but now I see.

Verses ten through sixteen give us the second vignette. Some sat in darkness. In the shadow of death. Prisoners in affliction and irons. For they had rebelled against the words of God and spurned the counsel of the Most High. So he bowed their hearts down with hard labor. They fell down with none to help. This is that steadfast love that shines upon our darkness. Now, the physical image clearly of prison is not necessarily something that all of us can buy with. Maybe some have spent some time incarcerated Overnight in jail, or you're involved in ministries where you're able to go in as the Word of God challenges us in James chapter one, to not forget those who are in prison, how easy it would be to forget them. They need to know that they are not forgotten, particularly those who know the Lord, that they are being remembered by their brethren outside. But those situations often when we leave them. And

some of you I've been to different facilities with as you leave. It is a sobering thing. And we're grateful for our freedom. And as bad and as dark as a modern prison may seem, the literal darkness of ancient prisons was far worse. They were almost always underground. Sometimes just caves. No windows. Damp, filled with vermin. Pitch black. A prisoner would not eat unless there was someone on the outside who brought them food. They were alone, languishing, as it says, drawing near in the shadow of death. And those condemned to such prisons were usually in irons in their legs, locked away behind heavy metal doors. They were quite literally tucked away with no hope. Now, there's no missing the spiritual metaphor here. And furthermore, the imprisonment that is here is just verse eleven says, for they had rebelled against the words of God and spurned the counsel of the Most High, and spiritually speaking, before the holy, righteous justice of a perfect God. We too are condemned, and God's perfect justice requires a due penalty. But it's also referring to the living prison and darkness of sin, its enslaving, life sapping power. The deceit of sin is that it promises freedom from the restraints of God, offering indulgence and and pleasure without accountability. But sin is a hard master and it enslaves and bows the heart down, knocking us flat, as it were. The evil one taunts that there is no one. Verse twelve to deliver. But again, the urgent plea in verse thirteen is, cry out in your trouble. Do not believe the lies of the evil one, the lies of sin. There is freedom in the Lord. Now what's interesting in this passage is that phrase the shadow of death. In verse fourteen it says, he brought them out of the darkness in the shadow of death. It doesn't say that he shined upon them, but what else is that coming out of the darkness, into the light, but being shined upon by God's goodness and his grace? And that last phrase really is one word in the Hebrew. Shadow of death. It's the same one found in Psalm twenty three, but it's also in Isaiah nine where it's translated in verse two as deep darkness. The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. Those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness. On them light has shown. And the context of these verses is the prophecy of Christ, the one described just a few verses later with these words. For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. It is Jesus who delivers his people from the distress of their just condemnation of death for their sin, or from the entrapment and deceit of sin's power in their lives, so that they we are released from darkness into his marvelous light.

The third vignette serves as something of a bottom line summation, as I see it, of the sinner's trouble in the general sense. Remember how I said it was rendered in the King James? Fools because of their transgression and because of their iniquities are afflicted? You may say that sounds sort of like a proverb. Well, it is proverbial, because this is a wisdom psalm, as we see in the last verse. But verses seventeen through twenty two say that the trouble is clearly self-inflicted. Some were fools through their sinful ways and because of their iniquities, suffered affliction. They loathed any kind of food, and they drew near to the gates of death. Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress. He sent out his word and healed them and delivered them from their destruction. Now this foolishness and sinful ways is interesting, because the word translated sinful also means rebellious. And so again, we have here this idea of the foolishness being the result of rebellion against the word of the Lord, even though he would send out His word to save them. Initially, they spurned it, and that's why it says some were fools. Or at least, as it says in the King James, Fools, because of

their transgression, are afflicted. It's just true. Now, the thing about a fool in the Bible is the fool is the person who should know better. He has been instructed, but he will not receive instruction. In fact, he will not learn. Sometimes even the hard way. The true fool is the one that not even blows can correct. I'll never forget. And I can even feel it. When my mom told me once as she was ironing and left the room. Don't touch that, it's hot. Now, I was probably about five and I knew the iron was hot, but sort of like. Romans seven. You know, I wouldn't know what sin was unless I pushed it. The law says don't send. This is what I do. It's the wet paint principle. What do you do when you see a sign that says wet paint? You touch it. And so I held my hand up and I touched it. Quickly. But it did. What a fool. Well, not a total fool, because I did learn from my mistake. I should have known better. I did know better.

But that is the fool in the Bible, the one who will not learn by instruction, but must and learn, must learn the hard way by experience. How we ought to be wise and learn by instruction, and not have to go through the school of hard knocks. And in our more sober moments we realize that all too often we are in fact, really fools. We may not say it out loud. Sometimes we act like it really is better to ask for forgiveness rather than permission. And we're not about to ask permission because we know what the answer is. We talk ourselves into thinking that the sin we're contemplating is really not that significant, or the situation is not the same, and it's not that serious, and we think we can handle it instead of fleeing from it. And it's then when in our shameful regret, we see our foolishness that we need to hear the good news that God is not like men. Once we are aware and ashamed of our foolishness, he does not humiliate us. He hears us when we cry out in our distress, so that we may receive the steadfast love that condescends to us in our foolishness and this condescension. It's not patronizing. He doesn't shame us, as I said, knowing that those who truly repent in this way have likely already had a sense of punishment from that shame. And he doesn't just ladle it more on their shoulders. His grace is like the father of the prodigal. He throws open his arms. He runs to us, embraces us, and lifts our heads. He's not embarrassed of us because we are running to him. As Hebrews two eleven reminds us, Jesus is not ashamed to call us brothers, even if we act like fools. Because we belong to him. And it's condescending love because he does not owe it to us, even though we have been foolish. But he delights to pour it into our hearts. And we see again just another beautiful part of this steadfast love having been redeemed. We have more to give thanks for. More to say so about. Finally, the psalmist urges us to give thanks for God's steadfast love that secures us in the midst of evil.

This final vignette, verses twenty three through thirty two. Some went down to the sea in ships doing business on the great waters. They saw the deeds of the Lord, his wondrous works in the deep. For he commanded and raised the stormy wind which lifted up the waves of the sea. They mounted up to heaven. They went down to the depths. Their courage melted away. In their evil plight. They reeled and staggered like drunken men and were at their wit's end. We might be easily tempted to mainly see this final vignette as holy material, maybe even the eyewitness account of some biblical mariner having been caught in a raging storm because it is quite vivid, and maybe some of you experienced that. The closest I've been is on a ski boat on Lake Keowee in a thunderstorm in South Carolina. Not fun, but not terrifying. But some here again, maybe have. I'll never forget Bob Ruth, a Navy veteran in the first church I served, John

Hanes and Jenny Hanes know him because they were at that church at that time. It was a short man, but a loving man, a passionate man. And he had served on an aircraft carrier in the South Pacific in World War Two. I'll never forget, he often would use the phrase clearly because of his life experiences. You can trust him. One day he shared, the only time I've ever seen a grown man whimper is on that aircraft carrier in the middle of the Pacific and the rage of a tropical storm. One minute we would be at the trough at the top of this wave, so high we couldn't see any water, only the sky that was black. And the next minute we crashed to the bottom of the trough of this wave and couldn't see anything but the black waters, afraid that every wave would threaten to overturn the turn the carrier. It was a big ship and wipe everything inside off the deck. Men would huddle, he said, and whimper, he said, and the look in his eyes was amazing. I hope I never experience anything like that ever again. We've said these vignettes serve primarily as metaphors for the spiritual trouble we face, and when we remember that the sea commonly represents chaos in the Bible, the Israelites associated the deep, untamed waters of the sea with a kind of uncreation that is everything dissolving and falling apart rather than coming together. Uh. The sea was filled with danger, hostile forces, creatures unknown, representing the demonic. So the spiritual symbol is clear. In this world, we often feel at the mercy of chaos. It seems as if everything around us is dissolving. Socially. Culturally evil is called good. Good is called evil. What is up? One minute is down the next. As the Hebrew of verse twenty seven says, our wisdom is swallowed up because we feel helpless and have nothing we can do in our own strength. And we reel. But in the heart of this vignette is verse twenty five. For he commanded and raised the stormy wind which lifted the waves of the sea. Now the greatest temptation I think we have in our modern era of radar, satellite, twenty four hour weather, TV and computer forecast models is forgetting that God commands the storm. Listen to verses seven and eight of Psalm one hundred and forty eight. Praise the Lord from the earth, you great sea creatures, and all deeps. Fire and hail, snow and mist. Stormy word fulfilling. Stormy wind fulfilling his word. The next time you find yourself on the Weather Channel, if ever you do stop for a moment, it won't be long before you'll see a map of some kind, you know, representing everything from warm fronts, cold fronts, rain, snowfall, temperatures, wind speeds, even lightning strikes. Turn the sound off. Look at the map. Watch its movement and contemplate this. Not a single breeze, not a single raindrop or snowflake on that map is random. Everything represented there is fulfilling his word. It is moving at God's command and at God's command only. We also remember that the same hand that commands the storm is the same hand that calms the storm. Look at verse twenty eight. Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress. He made the storm be still, and the waves of the sea were hushed. You can't help but immediately think of Jesus calming the storm in Mark four, when the disciples were crossing the Sea of Galilee, and this windstorm arises, and the waves were breaking into the boat. So much so that the boat was filling and Jesus was asleep. Well, of course, because he was in total control, even in his sleeping. And they woke him and said, teacher, do you not care that we are perishing? And he awoke and rebuked the wind and said to the sea. Stop it! Which is how you can translate that something about peace be still sounds so esoteric. Either way, it's very clear. They were filled with great fear and said to one another, who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him. In his steadfast love. God secures us in the midst of evil. And if God is powerful enough

and wise enough to send storms into our lives literally and spiritually, he is powerful enough and wise enough to protect us in both to bring us through them too. As it says, our desired haven. He knows what he's doing in sending such storms in our lives. We're reminded that we are neither wise or strong enough to control our world. But he is. Verse thirty three he turns rivers into a desert, springs of water into thirsty ground, a fruitful land into a salty waste. Because of the evil of its inhabitants, he turns a desert into pools of water, a parched land into springs of water. He secures us no matter the situation. As my friend Bob Ruth would say, you can trust him.

And so we come to the last verse, verse forty three, Whoever is wise, let him attend to these things. Let them consider the steadfast love of the Lord. It's interesting to get this far in the Psalm. After all of these vignettes. We might suspect they would say, whoever is wise consider the power of God. But instead it says, let them consider the steadfast love of the Lord. It's by paying careful attention, by way of thought and meditation on this love in our lives and in the lives of others, that the redeemed, we, the redeemed of the Lord, demonstrate that we've gained wisdom and are learning godly wisdom, a wisdom that is the grace of God that informs our lives and directs our lives. It becomes a worldview touchstone, a reference point. Whoever is wise then will end their distress, whatever it is or wherever it originated. Remember the goodness and steadfast love of God and cry out to him for deliverance. The heart of this kind of wisdom doesn't look to place, blame or evade responsibility. It knows that all God's sovereign care is that of a loving father, the strong and tender hand of a shepherd, and it considers what's true and turns in truth to the only place of deliverance, security, and freedom, God's love and mercy in Christ. And it's important, probably critical, to see the focus in the refrain of the Psalm as it says, upon God's wondrous works to the children of men. And there is no more wondrous work than this than in his steadfast love. God became man, and Christ for us wandered in our desert world, as it were, even as he himself said, with no permanent home here to lay his own head. He was unjustly imprisoned, bowed down and beaten, was not merely in the shadow of death, but he succumbed to it under the just wrath of God for our sin, punished for our foolish sinfulness, even forsaken by His Father as he bore his sin. And he entered into a world that was not as he had created, but one that was devolving deeper and deeper into the chaos of sin and death because of human rebellion. And in his dying he dealt death its very death blow, securing forever the redeemed. And yet he lives. And in him we live because of the steadfast love of God. And that's our line. It's the one thing we have in our world to say as believers, as the redeemed of the Lord. We are those who have not only full right, but also credible authority to speak, to bear witness to the reality of who Jesus Christ is. When all is said and done, there is no one who is a better authority to speak on the steadfast love of God than you and I. Those who have known it, who can say, I know that Jesus lives, and he is my Lord.

This past week I had the privilege of leading in the memorial service of Buddy Runnels, a Briarwood member many of you know and have worked with. He was very involved in mercy ministry in the early years. He was ninety-seven years old, and in the last four or five years he was not able to get out much. In fact, he spent most of the last time in a nursing facility. But Buddy was someone who knew how to say so. He was a man who loved the gospel, and he

shared the gospel. He was a Gideon, and he was always getting the word out, wanting to get the word out. And I remember visiting him sometimes and he would not be in his room. But then I would see him wheeling in in his wheelchair. He had been making his rounds on the floor to share the gospel with those around. One time he said, I'm not even sure they understand what I'm saying, but someone's gotta say it. They gotta hear it. Because he trusted he didn't know how much the Holy Spirit might use that, because it's not our job to convert. It's not our job to convict. It's our job to say so, just to bear witness of the steadfast love of God who found us in our lostness, who shined upon us in darkness, who has condescended to us in our foolishness and secured us in the midst of the evil around us. He is good, and his steadfast love endures forever. And if we know it, we better say so. Let's pray.