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## HORSES AND ARMIES AREN'T ENOUGH Psalm 142

Last night at our supper 6 group we recalled the awful events of 15 years ago today. We can all remember where we were on the morning of September 11, 2001. In many ways our nation has recovered from that catastrophe. But after years of war the malignant evil that gave rise to that inhuman and cruel attack is still very much alive and active in this world. It is nearly every day's business to hear of suicide bombings and other attacks in various locations in the middle east. It is not just happening "over there." Boston, San Bernardino and Orlando remind us that the random evil could erupt anywhere at any moment. It is discouraging to realize that after all this time, after all the effort, the money spent and most of all the blood spilled we are far from seeing that issue resolved. There is almost a despair about the possibility of finally defeating this particular evil. I find this to be very discouraging.

But discouragement shows up more often and more intensely in personal ways. A few years after he graduated from college Toby hit a real low point. He was trying to find his way in this world, but nothing seemed to be working out for him. He felt like everything he tried ran into a brick wall. One day Carissa called us. She and Toby were sharing an apartment and she knew that Toby was coming to our house for dinner that evening before he went to play hockey. She called to warn us. She said that Toby was as down and discouraged as she had ever seen him. She said he was in a terrible mood and felt completely hopeless. Sure enough, at our house he poured out a flood of discouragement and hopelessness. There was a bit of the "Where is God in all this?" kind of stuff mixed in. He felt God had abandoned him because he sure wasn't answering prayers.

No one enjoys being in that dark hole of discouragement. Eventually Toby's inner faith asserted itself. That experience was a turning point in his life that put him on the path that he is now on. But in the those dark days he didn't know that. All of us are going to have discouraging days. What should we do about it? Today we will look at words David wrote when he was discouraged. Let's look at Psalm 142.

### DAVID WAS DISCOURAGED

This Psalm was written when David was in a cave hiding from murderous and unstable King Saul. There were two occasions when David hid in a cave that we know of. According to 1 Samuel 22 after David returned from his unwise and ill-

fated sojourn in the Philistine city of Gath he hid out in the cave of Adullam. Adullam is about 13 miles west southwest of Bethlehem. There is actually an Adullam Caves nature park there. Later in chapter 24 he hid in a cave in En Gedi, which was west of the Dead Sea. There may have been, and likely were, other occasions when David hid in caves, but we know of these two for certain. We are not told specifically when David wrote this Psalm. What we do know is that he was understandably discouraged.

In verse 2 he poured out his complaint and told God his trouble. He saw more trouble ahead, for in verse 3 he said, “In the path where I walk people have hidden a snare for me.” You really get a feel for how alone he felt in verse 4 where he said “no one is concerned for me” and “no one cares for my life.” In verse 6 he said he was in desperate need because those who opposed him were too strong for him.

It is not hard to understand why David was discouraged. There was a time in chapter 16 when David was the youngest son in his family taking care of the sheep, and nothing more was expected of him. He likely assumed that he would be merely the little brother that no one gave another thought to. Then Samuel, the great prophet, showed up and proclaimed that God had decided that none other than this anonymous youngest brother was going to be the next king of Israel.

Not long after that David defeated the fearsome warrior Goliath whom no one else even dared oppose, winning a great victory for Israel. He became a part of the royal court, then ascended the ranks of the military to become possibly the most popular hero in his nation. People everywhere sang his praises. He led the army to one victory after another, and with every triumph his popularity soared even higher. Then he married the daughter of the reigning king.

Everything was falling into place for him. He likely anticipated that his life would remain on that trajectory, a path leading straight to the throne of Israel. Instead, his life took a radical downward turn and began a descent into misery that lasted years. Saul tried to kill him repeatedly. He spread the word that David was plotting to assassinate him and take over the throne. He used all of his authority and resources available to him in his effort to track down and kill David, whom he erroneously perceived to be an imminent threat.

David has had narrow escapes of various kinds, has sought help from people only to see them be killed for the crime of innocently aiding him, had to feign insanity before his arch enemies and now finds himself hiding in wilderness caves. Saul has not given up and is laying traps for him. There is nowhere he can go safely in

Israel. He can't go home. He is separated from his wife. He feels like he has lost everything and he has no hope of changing the situation. Writer Richelle Goodrich once said, "I've had the kind of bad day no quote can fix." Well David had at that point the kind of bad life no quote could fix, and it had been going on for years, with no end in sight.

Back almost 20 years ago Will Smith and Gene Hackman starred in a movie called *Enemy Of The State*. In it Smith played a lawyer named Robert Clayton Dean who bumps into an old friend. What he doesn't know is that his old friend has a video of a murder committed by an official of a secretive government agency. He is on the run from their agents and unbeknownst to Robert he slips the disc containing the video into Robert's shopping bag. That friend almost immediately is killed, following which Robert's life blows up. Evidence purporting to tie him to a mafia boss appears, supposed evidence of an affair surfaces even though it never happened, his wife leaves him, he is fired from his job and his bank accounts are frozen. Not long after that the attempts on his life begin. The guy did nothing wrong, but he finds his life ruined and now threatened by powerful government agents. It is frightening, disorienting, frustrating, and potentially fatal for him. David was in a very similar situation. It was frightening, and after months and years of it he is weary and discouraged.

David was not the only godly man who felt discouraged because he faced a seemingly hopeless situation that wouldn't go away. In Numbers 11 the people of Israel were complaining yet again. God saved them from the Egyptian Army by parting the Red Sea, miraculously provided water in the desert for them, and every day gave them the miracle of manna to eat. But they weren't happy. They complained that they didn't have meat to eat. Moses had reached his limit. He was discouraged.

In Numbers 11:11-15 he whined to the Lord, "Why have you brought this trouble on your servant? What have I done to displease you that you put the burden of all these people on me? Did I conceive all these people? Did I give them birth? Why do you tell me to carry them in my arms, as a nurse carries an infant, to the land you promised on oath to their ancestors? Where can I get meat for all these people? They keep wailing to me, 'Give us meat to eat!' I cannot carry all these people by myself; the burden is too heavy for me. If this is how you are going to treat me, please go ahead and kill me." I think it fair to say Moses was not a happy camper.

Elijah the great prophet had that dramatic face off with the prophets of Baal that turned out to be a miraculous rout of the idolaters. It was one of the great victories

in history. Elijah figured this would turn the tide, Israel would follow the true God and all idolatry would be swept away. The war was over. It didn't happen. Instead, Jezebel, one of the chief idolaters, not only stayed in power, she threatened to kill Elijah. Nothing had changed! Nothing except now his life was seriously in danger. He ran away and hid in the wilderness. In 1 Kings 19:4 Elijah sat down under a bush and prayed, "I have had enough, Lord. Take my life." There you can see the irrationality that profound discouragement can produce. Hey, Elijah, if you wanted to die why bother running away? Just stay there in Israel and Jezebel will take care of the problem for you.

Poor Jeremiah. No one ever listened to him, or if they listened they rejected what he said and hated him for it. Hear his words in Jeremiah 20:7. "You deceived me, Lord, and I was deceived; you overpowered me and prevailed. I am ridiculed all day long; everyone mocks me."

Discouragement is not some weird thing that is unique to you. All of us will have to do battle with it at some point, usually at a number of points in our lives. It happened to Moses, David, Elijah and Jeremiah. All of us will experience situations that are so hard, so impossible to understand that they drain all of our reserves and leave us feeling exhausted, hopeless, defeated and depressed.

I have experienced this in my life and observed it in the lives of others. After our first son died Laurie and I were plunged into a pit of pain and despair that is indescribable. We soldiered on, but in the two years that followed our little church went through a real slump. One day a good friend came over to see me. His words of encouragement were, "Maybe you just don't have what it takes to be a pastor. I think you should consider other options for your job."

That was really discouraging. But some of the things I've seen brothers and sisters go through are worse. I watched one guy who had had a very effective ministry, but then got a new boss who told him he wanted to go in a different direction. He was let go. He did everything he could to find another ministry, but as that failed he tried getting a job in another field, but month after month passed, a year went by, and he couldn't get a job that would allow him to support his family. The months continued to pass, and try as he might, nothing worked. His desperation was awful to behold.

There is a family in our church that has the mother of all awful neighbor stories. It has been terrible. Nothing they have done has worked, and it dragged on for years.

Several in our church are dealing with brutal health problems that either refuse to yield to treatment or are going from bad to worse.

Sometimes it's not our circumstances or what other people do that cause us discouragement. Sometimes it is our own failure and weakness that get to us. We see what we should have done, or at least in hindsight think we should have and we beat ourselves up. We feel like throwing in the towel. Most of the time when I go to the beach I get a little twinge of regret. I love living by the ocean, and I love going to the beach, but I feel like I'm not getting as much out of that privilege as I might. I see guys surfing and wish I could do that. It looks like so much fun. And I got just enough taste of it that I know it is really a kick to actually ride a wave. There's a reason I don't do that though. I tried. Unfortunately I tried to learn to surf when I was well into middle age, bordering on being chronologically gifted. What I experienced was failure and frustration, enough that I got discouraged. My own failures shouted at me, "you'll never be able to do this very well. What's the point?" So I gave up. Repeated failure can cause us to be so discouraged that we just give up.

The upshot of all of this is that David is not alone. You will find yourself right there with him in that cave some day, saying with him, "my spirit grows faint within me. Those who pursue me are too strong for me."

#### DAVID RESPONDED WISELY

How are we to deal with discouragement? We can just wallow in it, curl up into the fetal position and feel sorry for ourselves. Moses and Elijah both engaged in a little of that. Poor me. I'm doing this all by myself. I'd rather be dead. We can grow resentful, maybe of others who aren't helping us or have caused us to be in the situation we're in. Or we can even grow resentful of God because he has let us down. We can just shut down emotionally and sort of keep going through the motions with no enthusiasm whatsoever. We can complain and whine to everyone in sight. If you choose that route I'd suggest you remember the words of Mark Twain, who said, "Don't complain about your problems. 80% of the people don't care and the other 20% think you deserve them." And, of course, a very common response is the one I mentioned in my surfing efforts. Just give up. Just quit. None of these are ever going to make us or our lives better. So what did David do in his very discouraging situation?

#### *He talked to the Lord*

One of the curious effects of discouragement is that we often stop talking to the One who is the key player. We complain, tell lots of people about how unfair our

situation is, despite the fact that they probably can't do a thing about it. We feel sorry for ourselves and want everyone else to feel sorry for us too. But we stop talking to God. Often this is because we have talked to him, and he hasn't done anything about the situation. That's why we're discouraged. So we just go radio silent in regard to God.

There's a pastor back east named Steve Shepherd (appropriate name for a pastor). He bought a new car from General Motors. Not long after he bought the car he began noticing an awful smell in it when he turned on the air conditioning. He took it to the dealer. They supposedly fixed the problem, but when he turned the AC on it immediately began emitting that terrible smell again. He took it in again, but they still couldn't solve the problem. He tried yet another time. After the third trip to the dealership the service manager told him if it happened again to spray Lysol into the vents, then with a rather arrogant lack of concern he said, "If that doesn't work just put up with it." That's just awful. But sometimes it feels like we take our concern to the Lord and he seems to say "put up with it," so we quit.

Remember that David had plenty of reason to decide he was done with talking to God. When the situation started he talked to the Lord about it, and it just went from bad to worse. By this time it has been going on for quite a while and there was exactly zero reason to think it was going to stop. But David still talked to God. In this Psalm he poured out his heart. His feelings come gushing out. He tells God of his weakness and hopelessness. He admitted his need and he did not sugarcoat it. He was desperate. This was not a casual request. In verse 1 he literally said, "With my voice I cry out." He was not meditating. He was not having a quiet time. He was verbally wailing to God in a pitiful plea of desperation. Sometimes I think we do religious things. We quietly pray. David was real with God. He spoke aloud, he desperately cried out for God to listen and to set him free from his situation, which felt like a prison.

Just verbalizing our discouragement sometimes can help. Often we just need to talk about it, then we feel a little better. But the bigger issue here is that talking to God was an act of faith. It was a statement that God still cares and is capable of dealing with the situation. Just reminding ourselves of that truth helps us be less discouraged.

### ***He remembered who God is***

Did you notice that right in the middle of crying out to the Lord, as he writes about his trouble, about how people are laying traps for him and there is no one to help him David said in verse 3, "When my spirit grows faint within me, it is you who

watch over my way.” People may be putting out traps on the path ahead of him, but God sees it all. God is watching out for him even when no one else seems to care. David was saying, “I don’t understand this, I am weary and struggling, I feel like no one cares, but I know that you are still watching over me. You are still there caring about me and you do hear me.”

Psalms 121:7-8 says, “The Lord will keep you from all harm, he will watch over your life. The Lord will watch over your coming and going both now and forever more.” Why did the Psalmist mention our coming and going? He is reminding us that God sees it all. He sees the details. He doesn’t forget about us when we go away somewhere. He is watching over us even in the small details of our lives, even when it doesn’t feel like it. Psalm 33:18-19 says, “The eyes of the Lord are on those who fear him, on those whose hope is in his unfailing love, to deliver them from death and keep them alive in famine.”

In Psalm 142: 5 he cried out to God, “You are my refuge, my portion in the land of the living.” In Psalm 27:5 David wrote, “In the day of trouble he (the Lord) will keep me safe in his dwelling; he will hide me in the shelter of his sacred tent and set me high upon a rock.”

David knew that God was watching over him. God had found him when he was a nobody tending his father’s sheep and chosen him to be the next king. God had been with him when he faced off against Goliath and defeated the fearsome warrior no one else dared fight. God was with him when Saul came after him while he was hiding with Samuel the prophet. Three assassination teams were sent and finally Saul himself came and God foiled them all. He did it in a way that was funny and seemed almost like child’s play for him.

Psalms 33:16-17 say something that defies conventional wisdom. “No king is saved by the size of his army, no warrior escapes by his great strength. A horse is a vain hope for deliverance; despite all its great strength it cannot save.” Doesn’t that seem like a debatable point, at best? It feels like I could make a pretty good case for the idea that a king is saved by the size of his army and a warrior does escape by using superior strength. Who do you think is likely to win a football game between, say Alabama and Idaho? Alabama has better players, by far, and they will win, no question about it. It sure seems like the stronger, better team wins, and the stronger army usually wins too. Honestly I don’t feel especially threatened by North Korea. By the way, is there something wrong with the water in the presidential palace of North Korea? How is it that every ruler of that benighted nation is a grade A, 100% grass fed lunatic? As delusional as Kim Jong Un may be

he still has enough of a glimpse of reality to know that should he ever have the temerity to try to attack the United States it wouldn't be long before all that is left of his country is a smoking hole in the ground.

Psalms 33 makes a bold statement that while it appears that's how the world works, the truth is that God is greater than the strongest of armies and the most powerful of horses. In the end our hope is in him, verses 18-19 tell us. So verse 20 says, "We wait in hope for the Lord; he is our help and our shield."

David was the poster child for this truth. If the Las Vegas people were operating in his day who do you suppose the odds would have favored, Saul or David? Saul had the armies, the intelligence network, and the power to do whatever he wanted. What did David have? A cave. They probably would have removed that contest from their books because no matter what they put the odds at, they wouldn't get any bettors putting their money on David. Saul had the armies and the horses. But David had God watching over him. Who won? David did.

I was terrible at golf. But I remember playing so poorly that I would be thinking I hate this game, I am never going to play again. Then I would hit one good shot and think "I love this game!" Just a little hope that I could be not awful was all it took. Hope made the difference. As long as there is hope we can overcome discouragement. And as long as God is watching over us there is always hope.

### ***He focused on the right outcome***

Look at verse 7. David wrote, "Set me free from my prison, that I may praise your name. Then the righteous will gather about me because of your goodness to me." What David wanted was to be able to praise God. He wanted people to gather around him and be amazed at how God had rescued him so that he might be glorified.

My typical plea might be, "Set me free from my prison so that I don't have to fear and struggle anymore because I'm really tired of it. I want to be safe, comfortable and happy." That was not David's main concern. His main desire was to praise God. What he wanted most was that God would be glorified in his life.

David probably wrote Psalm 63 around this time. It was written, its description tells us, "when he was in the desert of Judah." In verse 1 he wrote, "You, God, are my God, earnestly I seek you; I thirst for you, my whole being longs for you in a dry and parched land where there is no water." In verse 4 he said, "I will praise you as long as I live, and in your name I will lift up my hands." In Psalm 34:1-3 right



about the time he was in the cave of Adullam after the train wreck of his visit to Gath he wrote, “I will extol the Lord at all times; his praise will always be on my lips. I will glory in the Lord; let the afflicted hear and rejoice. Glorify the Lord with me; let us exalt his name together.” David cared most about praising God, about bringing him glory. That was the outcome he focused on.

Paul expressed the same idea in Philippians 1:20. In verse 19 he wrote that he knew that his situation, which was imprisonment and a trial for his life, would turn out for his deliverance. In verse 20 he explained what deliverance meant to him. “I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death.” The point wasn’t whether he lived or died but exalting Christ.

One of the main contributors to discouragement is failed expectations. We hope for something, we have an expected outcome, and when it doesn’t happen we are disappointed. Suffer enough disappointment and it adds up to discouragement.

Psychologist and researcher Jaime Aten led a study of survivors of Hurricane Katrina. He found that people who showed higher levels of what he calls “spiritual surrender” tended to do better. He said that didn’t make sense to him because it seemed passive. Then he was diagnosed with stage 4 cancer. His prognosis was grim. He prayed for healing, but there came a day when he surrendered to God’s will. He says, “I finally understood. True spiritual surrender is far from passive. It is a willful act of obedience.” David had that surrender, wanting not his own way, but God to be praised.

Ricardo Lockette rose up the ranks of pro football and eventually helped the Seattle Seahawks win the Super Bowl in 2014. But on November 1, 2015, the wide receiver and special teams player, was blindsided with a vicious hit and was left sprawled on the ground in front of 90,000 fans. A year after the hit that nearly broke his neck and took his life, Lockette reflected: “It's crazy what matters to you when you're in that situation. Cars, jewelry, big houses, Super Bowls? It all seems so meaningless. I came up from nothing. Undrafted, practice squad, released a bunch of times, then I made it to three Super Bowls in a row...I used to want a black Lamborghini and a seven-room house. That's what I dreamed about. Now, all of a sudden, I can't move. And the only thing that mattered to me in the entire world was being able to see my family again, to hold my kids in my arms.

My head coach Pete Carroll used to preach to us all the time: “You live in a temporary fairy tale. Your fans are temporary. Your coaches are temporary. Your

teammates, as much as they love you, are temporary. The big houses you live in are temporary. You can enjoy all that stuff, but it's not what will bring you happiness.” When I was lying motionless on that turf in Dallas, I was completely dependent upon the help of others. It was the exact opposite of the mindset I had from the moment I got to Seahawks camp as a rookie: You're a rock star. You're a leader. You're the alpha. This is all yours for the taking. Then, in one second, you're helpless.

If our expectation and hope is that we can glorify God, then we need never be discouraged. We will expect and hope for things that don't happen in this world. That's how life is. But we can praise and glorify God no matter what the circumstance. If our goal is that Christ would be exalted, whether by life or by death, then we need never be discouraged.