

Psalm 107:1-3,17-22**Saved by God's Word**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

One of the enduring messages of the Reformation is that salvation is a gift from God, and we are unable to achieve it ourselves. We get this quite clearly in our Ephesians reading today, but I actually want to focus on our Psalm. We only read a small selection of verses today, but they were enough to give us the main emphasis. And if we do read the whole thing, we see a pattern and a couple of key phrases repeated several times throughout Psalm 107.

In four different situations, the people of God are in trouble. And four times the Psalm says, "'Lord, help!' they cried in their trouble, and he saved them from their distress." And four times it also says, "Let them praise the LORD for his great love and for the wonderful things he has done for them." This is a core truth of our faith. All our praises, all our efforts, all our good works are in response to the redemption that is ours in Christ Jesus. And the response called for in this psalm is to tell the story.

But before that, it starts like many others: "Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good! His faithful love endures forever." This is a standard introduction for a call to praise. And in this case, it's the 'redeemed' who are called to praise the Lord God. Those that God has gathered from many lands, from east and west, north and south. Some have wandered in desert wastelands. They have no place to call home. Some sat in utter darkness. They were imprisoned, with no way out. Some were fools and rebelled. They wanted to go their own way, but it only brought grief and misery. Some went out on the sea in ships. They faced deadly storms in the boundless ocean.

Maybe one of these groups reminds you of your own life. Possibly not in the most literal sense of deserts or dungeons or the wild ocean, but certainly in the need for someone to redeem you, to rescue you from trouble. It's certainly also a reminder of the history of the people of Israel. In today's Old Testament reading about the bronze snake on the pole, the people of Israel had been wandering in the wilderness after escaping from Egypt. And they were constantly grumbling about the lack of food and water. Instead of praising God for rescuing them, they complained that he had just brought them out into the wilderness to die. This complaining resulted in a plague of venomous snakes, but God also provided a way out, a reminder of the one who could deliver from any threatening circumstance.

We may never find ourselves literally wandering in a desert wasteland, forced to dwell in a place of deep darkness, sick from our own folly, caught in a wild storm at sea, or confronted by venomous creatures who threaten our lives, but each of us has faced or will face those times when we need desperately the redeeming hand of God. And he can and does redeem his people from anything that threatens our life with him. This includes our own sin.

This psalm reminds us of all of that. It tells us that when we realise the situation, realise the depth of the trouble we're in, crying out to God for help is the answer. We can't dig ourselves out of a hole, no matter how hard we try. We can only cry out for help, and accept that help, and give thanks for that help. It's there four times in this psalm. 'Lord, help!' they cried out, and he saved them.

For the group lost in the folly of rebellion and sin, it says he saved them by his word. "He sent out his word and healed them, snatching them from the door of death." I find this particular description of God's saving help fascinating. What does it mean that God sends out his word? We do get similar phrases elsewhere in scripture.

For instance, Psalm 147 says this:

He sends his orders to the world—how swiftly his word flies! He sends the snow like white wool; he scatters frost upon the ground like ashes. He hurls the hail like stones. Who can stand against his freezing cold? Then, at his command, it all melts. He sends his winds, and the ice thaws.

(Psalm 147:15-18, NLT)

We get something similar in the prophet Isaiah:

The rain and snow come down from the heavens and stay on the ground to water the earth. They cause the grain to grow, producing seed for the farmer and bread for the hungry. It is the same with my word. I send it out, and it always produces fruit. It will accomplish all I want it to, and it will prosper everywhere I send it.

(Isaiah 55:10-11, NLT)

Of course, we can't forget the creation story in Genesis chapter one, where God creates everything simply by speaking. The Lord speaks the word and creation bursts into being. The Lord speaks the word and blizzards rage with snow and hail and wind. But the Lord speaks again and snow and hail melt. This is God's power to create and to sustain. We call this God's performative word. It does what it says. It accomplishes what he wants it to accomplish.

In response to this saving word of God, his people are called to proclaim another kind of word. A word of praise and thanksgiving. "Let them praise the Lord for his great love and for the wonderful things he has done for them. Let them offer sacrifices of thanksgiving and sing joyfully about his glorious acts." "Has the Lord redeemed you? Then speak out! Tell others he has redeemed you from your enemies." It's all about the word. The word of praise, the word of thanksgiving, the word of witness to the world. But before that, God's word of truth, of hope, of redemption. God's word spoken into our lives to bring us salvation.

Our gospel reading today had the well-known verse from John's gospel, that God sent his Son into the world to bring salvation. And John tells us at the start of his gospel how that sending happened. "The Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth." God has spoken a word of salvation and life to all creation. His name is Jesus. He is the Word made flesh. He is the very embodiment of God's faithful love which endures forever. He is our redeemer, the one who brings salvation. He rescues us in times of trouble. He is our Lord who has redeemed us.

So, let us speak out. Let us proclaim his redemption. Let us praise the Lord for his great love and the wonderful things he has done. Let us offer our sacrifices of thanksgiving, and sing joyfully about his glorious acts. Let us do all this because of what he has first done for us. By his grace, we are redeemed. By his rich mercies, we have been made alive together with Christ. God so loved the world that he gave his only Son so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Praise be to God for this gift of life and salvation. Amen.

May God's peace, which passes all human understanding keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus. Amen.