

Sermon April 2, Maundy Thursday 2015

## The Penitent Thirsts for the Lord

Psalm 143



**P:** Hear my prayer, O LORD; give ear to my pleas for mercy! In your faithfulness answer me, in your righteousness!

**G:** *Enter not into judgement with your servant, for no one living is righteous before you.*

**P:** For the enemy has pursued my soul; he has crushed my life to the ground; he has made me sit in darkness like those long dead.

**G:** *Therefore my spirit faints within me; my heart within me is appalled.*

**P:** I remember the days of old; I meditate on all that you have done; I ponder the work of your hands.

**G:** *I stretch out my hands to you; my soul thirsts for you like a parched land.*

**P:** Answer me quickly, O LORD! My spirit fails! Hide not your face from me, lest I be like those who go down to the pit.

**G:** *Let me hear in the morning of your steadfast love, for in you I trust. Make me know the way I should go, for to you I lift up my soul.*

**P:** Deliver me from my enemies, O LORD! I have fled to you for refuge!

**G:** *Teach me to do your will, for you are my God! Let your good Spirit lead me on level ground!*

**P:** For your name's sake, O LORD, preserve my life! In your righteousness bring my soul out of trouble!

**G:** *And in your steadfast love you will cut off my enemies, and you will destroy all the adversaries of my soul, for I am your servant.*

Grace and Peace to you from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

I don't think that most of us don't understand what it's like to live in a thoroughly parched land—dry, hot and empty of sustenance, that it drains the life out of you within a matter of hours. Apart from Osoyoos and some other parts of Canada like the Athabasca Sand Dunes, we don't have any places that could truly be classified as desert in Canada.

Our military service members who have deployed to Iraq, particularly during the summer months, know what it's like to live in a thoroughly parched land. During the month of August in temperatures climb to over 55 degrees Celsius, particularly between the hours of 10:00 a.m. and 5:00 p.m. There's no relief from clouds or rain. The wind brings no respite, but only serves as a source of pain, as hot sand is blown against any exposed skin. To be outside during this time of day in this part of the world is so incredibly draining and sapping of all energy that it's hard to understand unless you've

been through it yourself. At first you don't even recognize it because perspiration evaporates so quickly that you don't realize you're sweating profusely. Walking even a mile in the heat of the day is like running several miles elsewhere. Over the course of an hour in such heat, you really begin to feel it. Your body is being drained of vital nutrition, particularly fluids. Unless you receive sustenance, you will perish.

The truly penitent child of God recognizes that life in this fallen, sinful world is like that, all the time, no matter where you are. That is how the Penitent thirsts for the Lord.

From this perspective the psalmist writes Psalm 143. It's the last of the traditional Penitential Psalms. It is attributed to King David. One early inscription adds, "when he fled his son, Absalom." David was running for his life into the barren desert wilderness (2 Samuel 15). He was pursued by his own son together with the army of Israelites who followed Absalom. In his despair, David cries out to the Lord: "Hear my prayer, O Lord; give ear to my pleas for mercy! In your faithfulness answer me, in your righteousness! Enter not into judgment with your servant, for no one living is righteous before you. . . . I stretch out my hands to you; my soul thirsts for you like a parched land" (vv 1–2, 6).

David does not base his prayer on his own worthiness before God. Although relatively speaking, David is the innocent party in his conflicts with Saul, Absalom, and Adonijah, he recognizes that his own sins make him unworthy of claiming any blessings from the Lord. He bases his appeal on the Lord's faithfulness to his promises of deliverance through the coming Christ. David asks to be judged, not on the basis of his record, but on the basis of God's mercy. Because he is a child of God through faith, David can call upon the Lord for help.

Martin Luther writes: "The life of a saint is more a taking from God than a giving; more a desiring than a having; more a becoming pious than a being pious. Thus St. Augustine says that faith obtains what the Law demands. Therefore imploring, desiring, searching is the true essence of the inner man, as in Ps 34:10: 'Those who seek the Lord lack no good thing,' and in Ps 105:4: 'Seek His presence continually' " (AE 14:196).

Now, in our case, we do not have to be pursued by an enemy into a desert wilderness to call out to God in desperation. The fallen-ness of our sinful condition confronts us day in and day out. We stand under God's judgment. Add to that our daily sins, what we have done and what we have left undone. Our souls are spiritually parched, dried up; without God and the sustenance he provides, we are dead in trespasses and sins (Eph 2:1).

King David felt great oppression from his enemies. In fact, David felt like one who is buried alive forever, he says: "For the enemy has pursued my soul; he has crushed my life to the ground; he has made me sit in darkness like those long dead" (v 3). We, too, have an enemy pursuing us: "Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour" (1 Pet 5:8). The devil stalks particularly those who have been claimed by God as his dear children. Like wolves lying in waiting to ambush the unsuspecting, so Satan and his legion of evil angels seek to attack the faithful with despair, doubt, and eventual unbelief.

And, add to that the fact that those of the world despise us because we are not of the world. Regarding this Martin Luther writes: "Here one should keep in mind that this

psalm has been and is spoken in the name of the whole people of Christ and of each person individually. The daily enemies of this people are the worldly-wise and the self-righteous, who do not know and refuse to know anything about the grace of God” (AE 14:196). The devil and the world crush us, seeking to make us feel like we are abandoned by God, trapped in a casket and buried alive.

But there is more. David, this great warrior, who even killed a giant when he was still young, acknowledges his own weakness: “Therefore my spirit faints within me; my heart within me is appalled” (v 4). Our spirit, too, becomes faint and fails. The old Adam arises each day within us. We are weak and incapable of helping ourselves. We do not know where to go; we don’t know the best choices to make; we are like lost lambs in need of a Good Shepherd. If King David the one who had it all, even strength, physical strength cried to God, imagine us how much we need God.

If that is the case, as we face our sin and its consequences, as we face the enemies that assail us, the devil, the world, and our flesh, as we face our weakness, as we feel suffocated and faint, all the life and energy being sapped out of us, it is then that the penitent cries out to God. Like David, we cry out for mercy—the forgiveness of our sins. Like David, we “stretch out [our] hands to [the Lord],” for our souls thirst for God like a parched land (v 6).

And so, we cry out to God for sustenance, for word of God’s steadfast love, for refuge and deliverance from the enemy, for guidance and teaching, for the leading of the Holy Spirit, for preservation of life—life in God.

We cry out, but I’m sure you have had those times where like David, it seems like God doesn’t hear, or that God delays in answering us. Luther writes: “God’s delay in granting grace and help causes the soul to fear that it is forsaken and condemned. But it is put on the rack to make it desire greater and more profound grace and thus receive more perfect grace. Now he is a truly Christ-formed man who is inwardly disconsolate and of a contrite spirit and has a constant longing for God’s grace and help” (AE 14:201).

Yet in this Psalm we see that David is not simply crying out to the Lord wanting to be rescued, but what he really wants and is thirsts for is an ongoing relationship with God that will guide his whole life. And that is the way of a true penitent. We need to keep from thinking of God as a fire extinguisher that we turn to only in an emergency and then put back in storage until another crisis arises. Our need for the Lord and his sustenance is not only in times of crisis, but it is also constant, so we continually thirst for the Lord.

That’s what David did. And his weakness is overcome by thinking on the Lord’s great redemptive works of the past. All that God has done in the past, in “days of old,” together with his unfailing love, gives David confidence for the future.

And based on the past unfailing love, David asks the Lord to answer his prayer and his plea according to God’s faithfulness and righteousness. This Faithfulness and righteousness was going to be seen fully in Jesus Christ. That was a promise David hoped for, a promise still to be fulfilled. But for us is a promise now fulfilled. Luther writes: “Here it should be noted that the little words ‘Thy faith’ and ‘Thy righteousness’ do not refer to the faith and the righteousness with which God believes and is righteous, as some have thought, but to the grace whereby God works faith in us and makes us righteous. Thus the apostle Paul in Romans 1, 2, and 3 speaks of the righteousness

and the faith of God given to us by the grace of Christ” (AE 14:196). The only-begotten Son of God fulfilled all righteousness for us. He has taken away your sin! Now through Him God’s faithfulness and righteousness are yours!

This faith is something that our faithful, righteous God brings and sustains in us as he feeds us with his Word and Sacraments. It is all by grace, and it is all God’s doing. He is the one who comes with living water, our Savior Jesus Christ. God comes to us in the water of Holy Baptism, bringing us new life in Christ. Then He himself is the one who continues nourish and sustaining us with his Word as we hear it read, as we hear it proclaimed, as we study it in Bible class, and as we read it in our private devotions. He gives us nourishment to carry on, regularly assuring us that Jesus Christ is our Savior, that we are more than conquerors through Christ. And then again tonight, our Lord feeds us with his very body and blood in his Holy Supper. The very body and blood that tomorrow we’ll see given and shed for us on the cross of Calvary is given for us to eat and drink tonight for the forgiveness of our sins.

The Holy Spirit comes to us through the Means of Grace, God’s Word and Sacraments, to bring us forgiveness, life, and salvation. He also comes to lead us on level ground. Luther writes: “The good Spirit [that David prays for] is the Holy Spirit. He creates gentle, kind, and good hearts, which walk the right path, on which they seek God in all things and not themselves” (AE 14:203).

David wraps up Psalm 143 with a plea for life and rescue from enemies: “For your name’s sake, O Lord, preserve my life! In your righteousness bring my soul out of trouble! And in your steadfast love you will cut off my enemies, and you will destroy all the adversaries of my soul, for I am your servant” (vv 11–12). For God’s name’s sake, and not for our own, are we given life. All that we have is purely by God’s grace, and so all that we are and all that we do is for his name’s sake, for his glory. So regardless of what happens, we are his, and he will be glorified through us. During good times and bad, we have life in Christ. “For if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s” (Rom 14:8).

We are his workmanship, created in Christ to do what God has intended us to do, all to the glory of God (Eph 2:10). Luther writes: “I live in grace. Therefore my whole life serves Thee, not myself; for I seek not myself but Thee and Thine. Those who live in their own righteousness cannot do this. They serve themselves and look for their own welfare in all things” (AE 14:204). David declares himself the Lord’s servant, and so are we! But through Christ, we are not mere servants; we are the children of God and heirs of eternal life. We will have a seat at the banquet feast of the Lamb in heaven, not as servants, but as children of God, heirs of his kingdom.

Remember this: our Lord’s Supper always gives life—eternal life. It’s not the chalice, the vessel, or even the outward manner we take Holy Communion, but the life-giving body and blood of the Lord, given to sustain us as often as we partake of it, just as his words proclaim.

This night on which our Lord was betrayed, we who are parched and thirst for the Lord remember another psalm as we come to our Lord’s Table: “Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good! Blessed is the man who takes refuge in him!” (Ps 34:8). Christ gives us himself, his very body and blood in, with, and under the bread and the wine, for the forgiveness of our sins. And where there is forgiveness, there is the strengthening of faith and eternal life. Amen.