

God Rescues from Dark Places

Rev. David Lipsy

Have respect unto the covenant: for the dark places of the earth are full of the habitations of cruelty. O let not the oppressed return ashamed: let the poor and needy praise thy name.

—Psalm 74:20–21

There are some sermons a minister would rather not have to preach. But when the Word of God touches on something, no matter how distasteful it might be to our sensibilities, that means God deems it important enough for us to think about and preach about. This sermon is about something almost no one wants to hear. We sometimes come across passages in Scripture we could wish weren't there, ones we find awkward explaining to our children. Yet if that which the Bible is describing is still happening today, and yes, also happening in God's church, then preaching about such things is not optional. Scripture must be allowed to speak.

In certain chapters of Scripture God includes catalogs of sins, passages like Leviticus 18 and 20, Romans 1, Galatians 5, and 2 Timothy 3. Why would God include them if these very sins didn't tempt and threaten His church, His people? These passages are warnings. Some of the sins in these lists would make many of us blush and that would be a good thing. What's *not* a good thing is the reality that some don't blush because they are living in these sins. And it is tempting for the others to think, "I would never do such things." But when God says the heart of man is deceitful above all things, He means it and includes your heart and mine, except by His grace.

God places these lists of sins before us, not only to warn us against committing them but also to alert us, including church leaders, so that we do not permit them to live in God's church so that suffering continues and sinners carry on with seeming impunity. Pray with me for the necessary wisdom, sensitivity, compassion, and faithfulness to write this sermon to God's glory and our edification.

Our text is a prayer, Psalm 74:20–21: "Have respect unto the covenant: for the dark places of the earth are full of the habitations of cruelty. O let not the oppressed return ashamed: let the poor and needy praise thy name."

1. God rescues from darkness
2. God rescues from shame
3. God rescues to freedom

Introduction

Psalm 74 begins with a question: "O God, why hast thou cast us off forever?" The question itself is striking and instructive. Surely Asaph the psalmist knew that God would never cast away His people, and certainly not forever, so why ask such a question? The reason is more significant than might at first appear. Through verses and passages like this, God teaches us that there is a place, a legitimacy for raw, unpolished prayers like these, especially in times of great suffering and need. Yes, we should always address God with reverence and godly fear. Yet recall how Jesus cried out on the cross: "My God, My God, why has thou forsaken me," using language from Psalm 22:1. The writer of Psalm 74 laid before the Lord that which caused his distress. In verse 3 he writes of enemies doing wickedly in God's sanctuary (church). In verse 4 he writes about enemies roaring amidst God's people. In verse 7 he recounts in prayer the desecration and destruction of the temple, where, not content with that, the enemies proceeded to break down all the local places of worship in Israel called synagogues. In the face of this devastation, Asaph complains that there seems to be no answer

from God, neither through signs nor prophets, so that there's no end in sight of the pain and suffering they were enduring.

Let us pause beside what we've seen so far and consider. I will never forget the moment some time ago when someone said to me, "Did you ever consider that some to whom you preach have experienced or are experiencing abuse of one kind or another?" I knew such suffering took place, also in Reformed churches, but it never really occurred to me that it might be happening in the church I was pastoring at the time, that it would exist so close to home. I will also never forget when someone actually did report a case of abuse to the authorities only to hear them ask two follow-up questions, "Does the abuser attend a church?" "Is it a Reformed church?" When I heard that my heart sank. Is that the reputation Reformed churches have in the community in which we live?

So instead of churches being safe havens for the abused, a place of refuge for those who have been so horribly sinned against, far too often the church, sometimes in ignorance and sometimes knowingly, becomes a place where the sinners are protected or given a slap on the wrist and the ones sinned against have to continue to face their abuser or feel forced to leave due to an ongoing sense of shame. Beloved, if you've ever read through the Old Testament, you will realize God is entirely opposed to such a situation and expects more from His people. In passage after passage the Lord makes it very, very clear He would have us protect and comfort the vulnerable, the needy, those who have been taken advantage of—even those He calls "strangers" who either pass through or settle into God's covenant community. If God's heart is so caring toward the vulnerable, it should be evident that we His church ought to be instruments of His care toward such.

After recalling God's miraculous deliverances in the past, the psalmist pens the words of our text. "Have respect unto the covenant: for the dark places of the earth are full of the habitations of cruelty. O let not the oppressed return ashamed: let the poor and needy praise thy name." Let us begin to consider this further in our first thought:

1. God Rescues from Darkness

The psalmist writes about the dark places of the earth that are full of the habitations of cruelty. What a description! The Bible uses the theme of light and darkness often. Darkness often stands for sin, for disorder, for spiritually blind sinners, even for Satan himself, otherwise called the prince of darkness. *Light* however is used to describe God, spiritual life, and generally that which is good and pleasing to the Lord. Paul pulls these ideas together in his famous statement in 2 Corinthians 4:6: “For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.”

The dark places of the earth. *Dark places* is one word in the Hebrew and that word is associated with wickedness, a place where sin hides, where terror is found. Sin thrives in the darkness, the sinner thinking no one sees. How many are violated, abused, shamed, mistreated in darkness—if not literal darkness, then in the darkness of wicked secrecy? These are the dark places of the earth. How many suffer in the darkness, are taken advantage of by the darkness, robbed of their childhood innocence by the darkness, whether it’s physically beating someone, abusing someone sexually or through degrading language, harsh criticism, or angry outbursts? How many have suffered for years, too ashamed or afraid to say anything because of what they fear might happen?

Such wickedness is so selfish, so cowardly, preying on the weak, the vulnerable, not satisfied to use the means God provides. Such sinners don’t care about the abuse victim as a person but view him or her as an object to be used and eventually discarded. Such wicked sinners don’t care how what they do could affect the victim, even far into the future—trust, relationships, marriage, child-bearing, etc. No, such weak, wicked persons misuse victims whom they should be protecting, should be loving, should be respecting.

The psalmist continues: the dark places of the earth are *full of the habitations of cruelty*. *Habitations* means the dwelling place of

such evil, implying this evil is repeated, having found a place to hide. *Cruelty* here has the sense in the Hebrew of violence, wrong, whether it's embodied in a hard, strict, and severe person or in someone who seems pleasant and loving. In the dark, however, such are cruel and ungodly.

How much abuse is repeated over and over, making the abused person feel worthless, shameful, dirty, confused, disillusioned? "Where was God when this was happening? Didn't He see? Didn't He hear my cry? My plea? Why did He not intervene?" Or to use the words of Psalm 77, "Hath God forgotten to be gracious? Hath he in anger shut up his tender mercies?"

Often, the sufferer feels trapped, at least for a time, in those dark places of the earth, filled with the habitations of cruelty. At such times, the temptation comes: God can't be real or doesn't care or He cares for others but not someone as worthless as I am. Trying to comfort such sufferers, such victims, with trite answers, pat expressions, even Scripture verses taken out of context, doesn't help but can actually make the suffering worse.

The psalmist, seeing these atrocities, these indignities, these injustices, cries out, "Have respect unto the covenant!" We would say today, "Lord, think upon these baptized victims. Rescue those whom Thou hast separated for Thyself at birth, who were meant to be brought up in a godly family and church family. Many psalms include cries of despair where those sinned against feel as if the Lord has forsaken them and forgotten them, that He turned His back on them or does not hear them. And how often physical abuse becomes spiritual abuse! How many evildoers try to mix religion in with their wickedness, seeking to suppress or otherwise manipulate their victims with God-speak. The Pharisees were such wicked ones, and their counterparts today are no better.

For you who have been victimized, how great the spiritual darkness can be for you, too, as your mind and heart reel between shame and pain and even misplaced guilt, blaming yourself for the evil that another has done or is doing to you. The "dark place" can also be your soul, another habitation of cruelty as the evil one tries

to destroy you and any hope in God you might have otherwise had, tempting you to give up everything.

If you have been or still are such a sufferer or know someone who is trapped in such dark places, such habitations of cruelty, know that God is real, God does care. But we need to consider carefully and thoughtfully just how He shows His care, His love, that He is present, just how He rescues the downtrodden from the darkness. May the Lord bless these next few words to at least begin your deliverance, your healing, your way out of the darkness and pain and despair.

God's Answer to Darkness—Light

Speaking broadly at first, Scripture's answer to darkness is light. When we think of God Himself, Scripture describes Him as light. "God is light, and in him is no darkness at all" (1 John 1:5). He is also called "the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning" (James 1:17). Darkness has no place in Him or with Him. And thanks be to God, the Lord doesn't keep the light to Himself but sheds light abroad in the hearts of people. "For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts." Jesus said, "Every one that doeth evil hates the light, neither comes to the light, lest his deeds should be reproved." Such wicked ones, oppressors, want to live in darkness, thinking this hides them and their evil deeds. But Scripture says they cannot hide, for all things are uncovered and open before the eyes of Him with whom we have to do. So God is light and will not allow darkness to ultimately prevail.

At the very beginning of time we read, "And the earth was without form and void and darkness was upon the face of the deep." Maybe that is what your life feels like—without form, void, darkness. But we then read this, "And God said, Let there be light: and there was light. And God saw the light, that it was good: and God divided the light from the darkness." God shines light into the darkness to dispel the darkness, to separate the light from the darkness, also in the lives of the vulnerable. The Lord Jesus came

into this world to dispel the darkness, to set free the prisoners of darkness and turn them into those that hope in Him. In this respect, hear this beautiful promise from Zechariah 9:11–12: “As for thee also, by the blood of thy covenant I have sent forth thy prisoners out of the pit wherein is no water. Turn you to the strong hold, ye prisoners of hope: even today do I declare that I will render double unto thee.”

But now the question. How does God bring sufferers this light, such hope?

The first battle against the darkness needs to take place within your soul and in your mind. What do I mean? Satan and the wicked abuser weave webs of lies to suppress and confuse you, in which case the light of God and His Word must shine clearly so that you have direction as to how to even think about your situation rightly. Know that God, as we said earlier, is very, very focused on helping those that are oppressed, those who are vulnerable to hurt by others. Having said that, however, He employs means, persons to help the vulnerable escape. What means? Which persons? Obviously, the first is His Word. Why that? You are to use it to expose each of the lies of the wicked for what they are.

Light Exposes Lies

The first lie? “If you say anything, it will ruin your marriage or family or relationship,” etc. The truth is, the abuser who is doing wicked things against you is the one destroying the marriage, family, relationships, etc.—not you! It is his or her sin, not your exposing their sin, that destroys relationships. Ezekiel 18:20 reads, “The soul that sinneth, it shall die. The son shall not bear the iniquity of the father, neither shall the father bear the iniquity of the son...the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon him.” You must not feel guilty because you expose such sins to light, for it is not your guilt but it is the wicked person’s sin that needs light shed upon it.

The second lie? “The church will take care of it.” The church indeed has a place in the violation of the vulnerable. But the

church is not the only one with a duty to deal with sin. When sins are also crimes—crimes identified in Scripture as well as in the civil laws—God provides another ministry that is called to address such sins. Romans 13:4 is clear about this, warning such sinners, “If thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain: for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil.” This means crimes are not to be dealt with using the so-called Matthew 18 principle where you are supposed to first go to the one sinning against you, then bring witnesses, etc. Crimes are sins against God, the church, and the state, and God has given the state the authority to deal with such lawbreakers. The reality is, the church brings the name of Christ into disgrace when it protects criminals from the instruments of justice God has ordained—in such cases as these, the civil authorities.

A third lie? “What good will it do to have a husband, wife, father, etc. arrested and potentially spend years in prison?” The answer to this lie is that the “good” that involving the civil authorities will do is threefold.

First, it stops the ongoing abuse or other destructive sinful behavior. Nowhere in Scripture is it anyone’s duty to endure such sin. Even if the abuser is an authority figure, that person’s authority is not unlimited, and they have no immunity against their well-deserved punishment for sinful, criminal acts. King David endured God’s judgement of the sword not departing out of his house on account of his heinous sins against Uriah and Bathsheba. If God held a “man after God’s own heart” accountable, then so must all who sin in a criminal manner.

The second “good” taking action does is it prevents potential abuse and destructive behavior against others. Ecclesiastes 8:11 warns, “Because sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil.” In other words, if action is not taken to stop such persons, they tend to go on in their sins, and against other victims.

And seldom are sins like this isolated from other sins, but often spill over to other vulnerable targets of the brazen sinner.

Third, using civil authorities is actually good for the eternal welfare of the person committing heinous sins. What would become of such a person if not stopped? God may well use this powerful medicine to work repentance!

A fourth lie? “But you led the person on by your attitude, clothing,” etc. We may well sin by means of such things but this never, ever gives license to another to commit atrocities against you. We repent of the sins we ourselves commit, but we must never blame ourselves for another who fails to do what his or her duty is. Scripture does not say “if Bathsheba could have been more careful not to expose herself to someone else’s gaze while bathing.” But the Bible is plainer than plain whose sin God judged. It was David’s sin who, instead of turning away his eyes, followed the lust that boiled up in his heart and went on to commit gross sin.

The fifth lie? The sinner threatens you with harm or other serious consequences. Such threats are all the more reason to put such a person in the hands of the police or other civil authorities. In Deuteronomy 22, God teaches us that when a person does not cry out for help in such situations, then he or she bears part of the blame for not doing so. Clearly God would have you cry for help! And if parents or others do not heed your cry or try to dissuade you from getting help, go immediately to the authorities, who are there to protect you. It is sin when someone tries to cover up or somehow enable an abusive sinner to continue in his or her ways.

A sixth lie? “You deserved it. You yourself are wicked. God is against you.” On one hand, it is true that all of us deserve hell no matter who we are or what we’ve done. But do not let the evil one ever tempt you to excuse the wicked behavior of another against you because of your own sins. If you have sinned, God’s way of dealing with it is for you to confess it to the Lord, repent of it to Him, trust Jesus Christ to forgive that sin for the sake of His all-atoning sacrifice, and seek grace to break with sin. But this in no wise gives another the right to sin against you. Never excuse

the heinous sins and crimes of others on account of your sin. Commit your way to the Lord and the abuser's way to the rightful authorities.

God's Means to Bring Light

God gives several means to counter the common lies that are often used to keep the oppressed from escaping their circumstances. But we also thank Him for the means He has raised up for our defense. We are thankful for faithful parents and/or friends who may help us escape the clutches of the wicked and their wickedness. These failing us, there are the authorities in church and state. Woe to those authorities when they take the part of the wicked and forsake the cry of the needy, the destitute, and the afflicted! Though far from perfect in the day Paul wrote Romans 13, civil authorities, also today, are to be used when sins are also crimes.

But since our greatest need is spiritual, you and I need a refuge, a hiding place, a rock of defense, a shelter in the time of storm. The Lord Jesus is that and more, as He shows over and over in the gospels, delivering the needy in all their many distresses. He invites you to bring your burdens to Him, your misplaced sense of guilt, your fears, your dread, your broken dreams and broken trust. He is the Savior who knows first-hand what it is to be betrayed, to be abused both spiritually and physically. And though it sometimes seems impossible to trust Him because He didn't prevent the hurt and pain from happening, you will find Him instead bringing glory out of suffering, strength in the midst of weakness, and beauty in the place of ashes. Just like Nehemiah was the restorer of broken walls, so Jesus Christ is the restorer of broken hearts and lives.

Both in Old and New Testament times, you can read true histories of those who knew God's presence, help, and love in the midst of the fiery trials they faced. Jesus is real. Jesus knows. Jesus cares. He says you may cast all your cares upon Him for He does care for you! He is the light that came into the world to dispel spiritual darkness. Do not try to find meaning elsewhere. Do not think that

if you just ignore what's happened to you, just bury it long enough, it will all go away. It doesn't go away. It comes back to haunt us. But it can be taken away by the One with the pierced hands. You will be helped mightily by the One who in all our afflictions was Himself afflicted and whose presence will sustain us.

When Saul of Tarsus persecuted Christians, Jesus said that Saul persecuted Him. Jesus intimately identifies your suffering with His. Shelter in Him; He will help you. Trust in Him; He will strengthen you. Use the means of His Word, authority figures, prayer, etc. to escape the dark places of cruelty and come into His marvelous light. You can. We are here to help you, comfort you, and defend you.

2. God Rescues from Shame

Shame often attends the nightmare as it happens to us. But there is also shame that remains even long afterward. The fear of others knowing, the self-doubt, disillusionment, etc. Do we dare confess our doubts, our anger, our shame? Who will listen? Will anyone listen? Who will believe me? Maybe your question is that of Tamar just before she was violated, "And I, whither shall I cause my shame to go?" She knew it would follow her, what happened to her. Who would want her? Who would accept her? Dare she tell anyone? But her actions betrayed what had happened. It couldn't be hid. And as so often is the case, the unfolding of events was ugly. The one who forced her was killed, and the avenger fled.

In Isaiah 50, Jesus would say prophetically, "I gave my back to the smiters, and my cheeks to them that plucked off the hair: I hid not my face from shame and spitting." In Isaiah 53, referring again to Jesus, we read, "Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows." Jesus died a painful but also shameful death. Think of the mockery, the ridicule, the taunting, the nakedness.

Jesus was put to shame so that those with shame could come to Him. He so cleanses, so transforms, so renews, that even your shame, the label you think everyone sees on your forehead—He can take it away. Do not carry another's shame, for the shame is

owned by the abuser, not his victims. Whatever shame you do carry for being so used in such sinful ways, Jesus is willing and able to take it from you so that your identity is safe with Him, your sense of wholeness restored. Sheltering in Him, you need not fear what others will say to you or about you. He will make you whole.

God set down the prayer in verse 21 of our chapter just for you: “O let not the oppressed return ashamed: let the poor and needy praise thy name.” Will that prayer go unanswered, beloved, oppressed one? It will not. You must not allow another’s sin to persuade you you are worthless. The evil one must not triumph in convincing you no one cares for you. Do not throw yourself away into promiscuity, self-harm, etc. out of a sense of shame, despair, hopelessness, or desire for control. God has something far better for you, something lasting, *ever-lasting*.

3. God Rescues to Freedom

The last three verses of this psalm are significant. “O let not the oppressed return ashamed: let the poor and needy praise thy name. Arise, O God, plead thine own cause: remember how the foolish man reproacheth thee daily. Forget not the voice of thine enemies: the tumult of those that rise up against thee increaseth continually.” God does not just comfort, though He does administer comfort in times of trouble. God does not only strengthen, though He does that too, mightily. God not only rescues from darkness and shame, but He rescues to something. God’s love is better than unconditional, leaving us better than it found us, always.

Those who use the means He gives and escape the darkness of sin can still feel haunted by the past for what seems like forever. We’ve already considered that it doesn’t just go away by itself, fade over time into a distant memory. Some imagine maybe marriage will help, or keeping busy will, or drinking or entertainment will, etc. But true freedom from darkness, guilt, shame, a lack of self-worth can only be experienced one way—not by accomplishments, not by accumulating things, but instead by the Lord filling you with a sense of worth greater than anyone or anything on

earth ever could. Consider His willing heart on display in the following verses of Scripture. “For thy Maker is thine husband; the LORD of hosts is his name; and thy Redeemer the Holy One of Israel” (Isa. 54:5). “I will betroth thee unto me forever; yea, I will betroth thee unto me in righteousness, and in judgment, and in lovingkindness, and in mercies” (Hos. 2:19).

Jesus is not a placebo, friend, not a trite saying. He redeems from shame. His love has set millions free—the beaten, abused, trafficked, shamed. His giving you an identity will set you free from trying to find one. You will know strength that exceeds all earthly power. You will have security you could never create or buy. You will know a love that never betrays, never walks away. Here is One with whom you can be vulnerable and safe, who is not ashamed of what happened to you but is willing to bear your shame. He was willing to suffer unimaginable indignities of all kinds so that you might know the power of the freedom He gives.

You will need help on your journey, skill in how to know Him better, and how to benefit from a relationship with Him. That’s what we are here for—to help you. Don’t remain in darkness. Don’t carry shame years on end. Listen to His voice: “My beloved spake, and said unto me, Rise up, my love, my fair one, and come away. For, lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone.” This is His promise: “They shall not be ashamed in the evil time: and in the days of famine they shall be satisfied.” This is His Word: “Thou shalt know that I am the LORD: for they shall not be ashamed that wait for me.”

It is my longing, my prayer, that God’s church will truly be a haven for the oppressed, not a hiding place for oppressors; a place for the weary to find rest; a shelter for the battered; a place where light can be seen by those trapped in darkness and shame; a place where hope can spring up in the hopeless heart; a place where the bruised and broken can find Jesus; and in Him, more than they ever thought they could have or be. A church that is not these things is no church at all.

Jesus “shall feed his flock like a shepherd: he shall gather the lambs with his arm, and carry them in his bosom, and shall gently lead those that are with young.” Let the hurt end, the healing begin; the darkness be dispelled, and the true light shine. May He give hope to the hopeless, meaning to the despairing, and a new identity to those who’ve lost theirs through sin. He is the One who will never, ever betray your trust. Amen.