

Sermon for May 28, 2017
Memorial Day Weekend
"Join the Chorus"

Psalm 66:8-20

"Precious Lord, take my hand, lead me on, let me stand. I'm tired, I'm weak, I'm worn. Through the storm, through the night. Lead me on to the light. Take my hand precious Lord, lead me home.

"When my way grows drear precious Lord linger near. When my life is almost gone. Hear my cry, hear my call. Hold my hand lest I fall. Take my hand precious Lord, lead me home

"When the darkness appears and the night draws near, and the day is past and gone. At the river I stand. Guide my feet, hold my hand, take my hand precious Lord, lead me home."

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This is a moving song, but even more moving is the story behind it. Tommy Dorsey wrote it in response to a personal tragedy in his life. In 1932 his wife and son died in childbirth. His response was to write this moving song of trust in God in the midst of this tragedy.

But that is only part of the story. The tune he used was actually written in 1844 to go with a hymn: "Must Jesus Bear the cross alone." The first verse of this hymn goes: "Must Jesus bear the cross alone, And all the world go free? No, there's a cross for everyone, and there's a cross for me." The hymn is about taking up a cross, but it ends in a triumphal way: "O precious cross! O glorious crown! O resurrection day! When Christ the Lord from Heav'n comes down and bears my soul away."

The hymn is about us taking up the crosses of life and Jesus making those crosses a means of lifting us up. I wonder if Tommy Dorsey, in the midst of his grief over the death of his wife and son, was singing this hymn. He was bearing a cross of grief and he longed for the "resurrection day" that the hymn talked about. He got to the last verse, which by the way is left out of our hymnal, that begins, "O Precious Cross" and needed to go further. So he called out to God. He just kept singing that hymn by writing new verses. "Precious Lord, take my hand ... lead me home."

Of course Tommy Dorsey was not the first follower of God to look to God in the midst of trials and troubles and end up praising God in the end. The psalms are full of such people. The psalmist says "You have kept us among the living, and have not let our feet slip." Apparently the psalmist was close to death, but God had lifted him or her out of the pit. The Psalmist also says "For you, O God, have tested us; you have tried us as silver is tried." He or she goes on "We went through fire and through water; yet you have brought us out to a spacious place."

The psalmist is unclear about the exact circumstances. It could apply to any number of situations in Israel's past. It could be the exodus where God led them through the sea. It could have been the time in the wilderness and leading Israel into the Promised Land. It could have been any of the crises that Israel faced during the period of the Judges.

Perhaps the psalmist was inspired to be vague for a reason. As a result the psalm could apply to any number of situations or circumstances; any number of times when they were tried by fire and led through water. Repeatedly God lifted them out of near death circumstances, and they praised God.

This is where it really gets interesting. In verse 13 the psalm suddenly switches to singular. Up to verse 12 it was "us" and "we," then it suddenly changed to "I" and "me." Some Bible scholars think that verse 12 was the original end of the psalm and then verse 13 to 20 were a later addition. It is kind of like Tommy Dorsey taking an older hymn and expanding on it in a deeply personal way.

This second psalmist said, "I will come into your house with burnt offerings; I will pay you my vows, those that my lips uttered and my mouth promised when I was in trouble." Just as God had lifted Israel out of the pit, God had done the same for this Psalmist. As a result the Psalmist seeks to praise God and worship God. The Psalmist says, "Come and hear, all you who fear God, and I will tell what he has done for me." He is going to give his testimony.

God has heard his prayers and the psalmist seeks to praise God! That praise includes offerings and songs and prayers of thanksgiving. But an important part of that is sharing what God has done in that individual's life.

God has lifted us out of the pit. We were as good as dead and God lifted us up. The human race was lost in sin and headed to destruction and death, and God sent Jesus to pull us out of sin to righteousness. He bore a cross and literally entered into our death and bore our sins, but then he rose again to give us eternal life. Now he calls us to take up a cross and follow him.

I know Jesus has lifted me up. Repeatedly, when I have faced darkness and death and trouble on every side, he was there for me. He took me by the hand and lifted me up. He gave me abundant and everlasting life, and I am here to praise God and bear witness to the goodness of our God. The Lord has taken me by the hand and led me through the storm and given me hope and so I will lift the Almighty up in praise.

Has God given you new life? Have you ever been in a pit and had Jesus take you by the hand and lead you home? If he has, then praise the Lord. Join the chorus. Lift up your voice in praise. Offer up prayers and offerings to God, and bear witness to God's mighty deeds in your life.

The writer of the second half of Psalm 66 was inspired to add his or her voice to that of the people singing the first half. Tommy Dorsey added his voice about what the "Precious Lord" did for him to the people singing "Must Jesus Bear the Cross Alone." Will you add your voice to the chorus of praise? Auditions will begin now!