

[Vacation Bear Story] As we gingerly emerge into some new normal, it's natural to look back—a luxury in the white-knuckle phase of coping. A word picture can help.

An image from Psalm 31 resonates or me: ***“Blessed be the Lord who has shown me the wonders of his love in a besieged city”*** (Psalm 31: 21)

A very modern image, the city under siege going back to antiquity. Picture scenes from The Last Kingdom, (my name is Utdred, son of Utdred, of Bebenburgh!) Game of Thrones: a feudal lord raises an army to storm a city, but is stopped at the gates, without wherewithal to overrun it. Instead lays siege to it—prevents residents from leaving the city, cuts off supply lines going in, and either conquers by attrition, or musters the resources to eventually storm the gates. A city can be besieged or months.

***“Blessed be the Lord, who has shown me the wonders of her love in a besieged city”***

Jerusalem is one of those cities besieged in this way throughout its history. It's in the background of many Psalms, like Psalm 46:

***God is our refuge and strength,***

***an ever-present help in trouble.***

***There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,***

***the holy place where the Most High dwells.***

***God is within her, she will not fall;***

***God will help her at break of day.***

The Assyrian army laid siege to Jerusalem in the time of King Hezekiah, after decimating the Northern Tribes. Despite a long siege, Jerusalem survived because Hezekiah had built a secret tunnel from a water source outside the city, the Gihon Spring, a tunnel that ran the length of 6 football fields underground, beneath the city walls, into the city itself. So the Assyrians couldn't cut off their water supply—and the city outlasted the siege: ***there is a river whose streams make glad the city of God; God is within her, she will not fall*** Wonders of love in a besieged city.

Interesting that Psalm 31 doesn't focus so much on the enemy at the gates—the external threat—as it does on the strain that being under siege places on the residents inside. Psalm 31 is all about relational tensions, lying lips, betrayals, people plotting behind your back and the like. Right, the external threat puts so much pressure on the

society that it begins to fracture from within—fault lines worsen, tempers flare. Here’s an example in the verse that leads up to the besieged city image:

***In the shelter of your presence you hide them  
from human plots;  
you hold them safe under your shelter  
from contentious tongues.***

The external threat of the pandemic has felt very much like being cut off from our normal supply lines, cooped up .... And the pressure of the external threat has only heightened internal strife. I think of the underlying injustices that have been there all along, only worsening during Covid. I think of some of the strains on our extended family relationships, fueled by lies, conspiracy theories, and the rest. GOOD LORD! I think of households where a parent or two parents are working at home, trying to juggle work and three kids doing online school, kids in different developmental stages where the pressures of pandemic are hitting them in very different ways. O My Lord, you all deserve medals of honor!!!

So yes, as Psalm 31 reveals, **external threat heightens internal strife**. It just happens. Realizing this, helps us to step back for minute, and de-intensify the blame game: either blaming ourselves for being too whatever or not enough whatever, or blaming the people around us for being too whatever or not enough whatever. No, it’s not all about how bad we are or the people around us are—something else is at play: External threat heightens internal strife. Just that simple recognition gives us space to say to ourselves or the people around us: you know this is a strain on all of us, we’re doing pretty good all things considered.

And then there’s the line that comes right after the besieged city image. It goes, ***“I had said in my alarm, “I am driven far from your sight.” But you heard my supplications when I cried out to you for help.”***

Being driven far from the sight of GOD, that’s extreme. A great example of catastrophic thinking—a mode our brain can go into. Getting ready for bed, we notice a little red spot on our face, and our alarm system calls *all aboard!* on the train that leads from wherever you are to Catastrophe Pennsylvania. Within 30 seconds of noticing that red spot, you’ve hurtled ahead to melanoma, chemo, radiation, hospice care, and then, insult to injury, you discover you’re allergic to morphine.

Sometimes I wonder... would it be helpful to have a data base of all the catastrophe scenarios our alarm systems generate stored somewhere out of sight, but we could run a data analysis now and again to realize how many of them didn't come to pass. Would that be a moment to say, "***Blessed be the Lord who has shown me the wonders of their love in a besieged city.***" All the catastrophes I entertained that didn't happen!

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In the coming weeks and months as we reckon with what we've been through maybe this Psalm can be a good companion, especially its central image.

It's an invitation to reflect on the consolations in a time of disconsolation, but not in some Pollyanna way—because we're naming and noting the underlying trauma, the experience of being besieged, beset on all sides, cut off from normal supply lines.

And yet, the wonders of divine love—like the waters of the Gihon Spring, traveling through a secret underground tunnel into the besieged city. An unanticipated blessing in the middle of the distress. Maybe we've undergone a helpful shift of focus or priority going forward. Those precious moments, looking back, when we had a sense of safety or comfort in the middle of the besieged experience. They say resilience isn't something we have going into a pressured time, it's something we develop under pressure. The external threat can bring out the worst, but also the best in us. Maybe reflect on this: What is the good that has been revealed in you under this pressure? How did you surprise yourself? Be attuned to that. What is the good in others that has been revealed to you under this pressure? Let's be attuned to that. Maybe a more intense experience of gratitude for the little things.

God is in the midst of her, the besieged city. Julia has a friend, Stacy. Stacy's mother died, and it was really hard time of grief. A deep grief is an experience of being under siege. In the worst time of it, in the space of a few months, Stacy received two dreams of her mother. In one Stacy's mother appears and tells where a ring is located. Backstory: It had been willed to Stacy by her mom, but they couldn't find it. Searched high and low. And then this dream in which her mom reveals the ring's location. And there it was. Another dream: Stacy's mom is on a shore with a dog that Stacy doesn't recognize. Stacy's mom calls to her, "I was wrong about the dogs!" Stacy knows what it means. When she was 13 the family dog died and Stacy asked her mom whether dogs go to heaven and her mom said, well they go to their own heaven, not ours. Stacy wonders why she doesn't recognize the dog in the dream, even though the dream was vivid. She describes it to her aunt, her mother's sisters, "Oh that would be the dog we grew up with." Yes, grief sucks, but Blessed be God who shows us the wonders of her love in a besieged city.

## REFLECTION

Let's take a couple of minutes now to sit with this. If you're in a spot where you can focus, get in a comfortable position, and just be present in your body, notice the weight of the body on the chair or wherever, the feet on the floor. Let your breathing slow and notice it. In through the nose, out through the mouth. Again. Keep it going.

I'll repeat this line a few times with a pause between. Just sit with the image for a bit:  
I'll alternate the different pronouns used in Scripture to refer to God.

Blessed be the Lord who has shown me the wonders of her love, in a besieged city.

Blessed be the Lord who has shown me the wonders of his love, in a besieged city

Blessed be the Lord who has shown me the wonders of their love in a besieged city

And now a prayer: Lord attune our hearts, draw our attention, activate our focus, stimulate our memories to the wonders of your love in a besieged city.

Over the next minute if something comes to mind or a few things, hold them in your focus