

Out of the Ashes
Comes Praise
Psalm 22:23-31

During this Lenten Season, we are talking about ashes. In Biblical times people would sprinkle ashes on their heads when they were experiencing deep distress. When you saw a person covered in ashes you knew they were repenting for a serious sin, or they were grieving or they were experiencing great anxiety.

Many of the Psalms describe times when the Psalmist went through such times. But the Psalmist almost always goes on to talk about how God raised him up from the ashes. Because the Psalmist was willing to confront these terrible emotions and honestly and openly confess them to God, rather than denying them or hiding from them or running from them, the Psalmist tells us that God brought something good from these experiences. The Psalms almost always end in praise and thanksgiving.

Out of the ashes good things can come. Last week we looked at Psalm 25, in which the Psalmist talks about the wisdom and instruction in right living that God can bring out of our sins, if we will confess them and repent. Out of the ashes of the sins of our youth comes wisdom.

Today, we will look at Psalm 22 where we learn that out of the ashes of affliction can come praise.

I ran into a fellow the other day that I hadn't seen in a couple of weeks. I asked him how he was doing, and he said, "Much better." Well, that kind of response invites a follow-up question, and so I asked it. I said, "If you're doing better now, you must have been doing worse before. What happened to you?" He said, "Oh, man. I've just been through a bout with the flu. It was rough." I said, "Yeah, that flu can make you feel miserable." He said, "It sure can. But now I'm feeling a lot better, and, I'm telling you, it sure feels good to feel good."

That was a kind of funny way to put it, but I knew what he was talking about. When you've been going through a rough time, feeling normal feels really good.

How many people go around saying, "Praise the Lord, I'm feeling normal today?" Only the people who have been feeling so low that normal is a step up. When God lifts us up out of misery, we are grateful to be normal. Out of the ashes of misery comes praise.

Psalm 22 is a psalm in which something good comes out of the ashes of affliction. This is one of David's psalms. This is the one that starts out with "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" He goes on to talk about being surrounded by his enemies. He talks about how they humiliate and torment him. He lives in fear that they will murder him.

We don't know exactly what part of David's life he is talking about. Actually, he could be talking about most of his life. Throughout his life there were people who were trying to kill him. The first story we have about David is when he was a boy, and he volunteered to fight Goliath. Goliath fully intended to kill David, although it didn't turn

out that way. So, the first time we encounter David, someone was out to kill him. And things didn't get any better.

When David was a young man in King Saul's court, King Saul became concerned that David was a threat to his throne. People were constantly talking about how wonderful David was. Saul was certain that David would use his popularity to try to take the throne away from him. One day, as David was entertaining Saul with his music, Saul fell into a rage. He tried to kill David with a spear. David was forced to run for his life. He spent the next several years of his life hiding in the wilderness and living in caves. He not only had to hide from Saul's soldiers and assassins, he also had to hide from the Philistines, who would have been happy to kill any Israelite alone in the wilderness.

Even after Saul died and David became king, he was still subject to assassins. His own son led a rebellion against him and would have killed him if he could have gotten his hands on him.

David spent much of his life being surrounded by people who wanted to kill him. For the first 21 verses of Psalm 22, he tells us in very graphic and emotional terms what that feels like.

But in the middle of verse 21 something happens. He suddenly says, "From the horns of the wild oxen you have rescued me." We don't know what happened, but it's clear that something has happened to his enemies. For the rest of the Psalm he goes on to talk about how he will praise God before the whole congregation in the Temple for his deliverance. Can you imagine that testimony, as David gets up in front of the church to say, "I just want to say, 'Praise God! Nobody is trying to kill me today?'" Actually it was probably a little more emotional than that. He goes on to say that to the ends of the earth and for generations to come people will praise God for delivering him.

Out of the ashes of the threats on David's life came praise so beautiful and so moving that to this day we use it in our worship.

How many of you have praised God today because nobody is trying to kill you? You probably wouldn't—unless somebody had been plotting to kill you. We take normal life for granted until life isn't normal anymore. When you have lived in fear for your life, normal looks pretty good.

We take so much for granted. There is that wonderful scene in the movie *Cast Away*. Chuck Noland has been stranded on a desert island for years. Finally he finds a way to get off the island and is rescued by an oil tanker. Back in civilization, he is talking with a friend about the challenges of readjusting to normal life. He says:

Somehow, I had to keep breathing. Even though there was no reason to hope. And all my logic said that I would never see this place again. So that's what I did. I stayed alive. I kept breathing. And one day my logic was proven all wrong because the tide came in, and gave me a sail. And now, here I am. I'm back. In Memphis, talking to you. I have ice in my glass...

This was a man who would never again take ice for granted. How many of you say, "Glory to God, I've got ice in my drink?" Probably no one except those who have either been marooned on a desert island or spent a few weeks in Europe. Chuck Noland would never take normal life for granted again. He would spend the rest of his life being grateful for the things that most people never give a second thought to.

We are seeing this phenomenon today. There are many people who, six months ago, were saying, “Another day on the job. What a bore. How I wish I could get a few days off,” who are now saying, “Praise God, I get to go to work today.”

Normal has become a cause of praise and thanksgiving. Out of the ashes of great anxiety comes praise.

Wouldn't it be nice if we could praise God for a normal life without having to go through trials and tribulations first? We can, if we pay attention to ashes that others have had to bear.

I do a lot of walking. I walk back and forth from the parsonage to the church several times a day. Many nights I go for a walk before I go to bed. A couple of times a week I walk two to four miles on my treadmill. Often times I give thanks to God for the gift of being able to walk. There's a couple of reasons for that. First of all, I watched my children learn how to walk. I don't know how anyone can take walking for granted after they have watched a child learn how to walk. So many times I saw my kids struggling to keep their balance and falling and hitting their heads on a coffee table or something else on the way down. They would cry their little eyes out, and then they would get back up again. Then, too, I've seen the other end of that. As a pastor, I've spent many hours in hospitals and nursing homes with people who want very much to be able to walk again. For some of us being able to walk is normal. For others it isn't. If you are able to walk, do you say, “Praise God, I'm able to walk today?”

Praise God for the people in your life. My mother had her 80th birthday last week. She is in pretty good health, and I expect her to be with us for many years to come. However I don't think I will take her for granted. Pastors have an advantage when it comes to taking people for granted. We are with people almost on a daily basis who have lost someone they love. Just this week I talked with a member who lost an elderly mother. Even though she was well into her 90's and had been in declining health for some time, the pain of her losing her was very real. Each time I talk with someone like that, I am reminded to be grateful that today I still have my mother.

We don't have to take everyday gifts for granted.

But often we do, until we lose them for a time. Then we arise from the ashes. Our health returns. We get a new job. Life returns to normal. And normal feels so good that we never really take it for granted again.

When you are going through a rough patch, call upon the Lord. Give thanks for the day of deliverance, which will surely come. Then when you see God's deliverance and life gets back to normal, praise God with unabandoned joy.

Out of the ashes of affliction comes praise.

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