

# Ready to Deliver

*Psalm 107:1-4, 10, 17, 23, 33-43*

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<sup>1</sup> O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures for ever. <sup>2</sup> Let the redeemed of the LORD say so, those he redeemed from trouble <sup>3</sup> and gathered in from the lands, from the east and from the west, from the north and from the south.

<sup>4</sup> Some wandered in desert wastes, finding no way to an inhabited town;

<sup>10</sup> Some sat in darkness and in gloom, prisoners in misery and in irons,

<sup>17</sup> Some were sick through their sinful ways, and because of their iniquities endured affliction;

<sup>23</sup> Some went down to the sea in ships, doing business on the mighty waters;

<sup>33</sup> He turns rivers into a desert, springs of water into thirsty ground, <sup>34</sup> a fruitful land into a salty waste, because of the wickedness of its inhabitants. <sup>35</sup> He turns a desert into pools of water, a parched land into springs of water. <sup>36</sup> And there he lets the hungry live, and they establish a town to live in; <sup>37</sup> they sow fields, and plant vineyards, and get a fruitful yield. <sup>38</sup> By his blessing they multiply greatly, and he does not let their cattle decrease.

<sup>39</sup> When they are diminished and brought low through oppression, trouble, and sorrow, <sup>40</sup> he pours contempt on princes and makes them wander in trackless wastes; <sup>41</sup> but he raises up the needy out of distress, and makes their families like flocks. <sup>42</sup> The upright see it and are glad; and all wickedness stops its mouth. <sup>43</sup> Let those who are wise give heed to these things, and consider the steadfast love of the LORD.

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What has your attention this morning? What is going through your mind right now?

Some of you might be wondering if you turned off the oven after making breakfast this morning. Some of you watched the Dallas Cowboys preseason game last night and can't help but wonder if they will score a touchdown at all this season. Some of you are thinking about a big project that's due later this week, or a repair that needs to be made at the house, or the need to balance your checkbook. Some of you are wondering what your kids or grandkids need to start the school year off on the right foot. And some of you weren't

thinking about or worried about any of those things until I brought them up...and now that's all you can think about.

As much as I wish that you are fully focused on worship this morning, I know how we are wired. Our human brains are designed to pay attention to the things that are relevant to us. We focus on things that matter to us. For instance, if you work in the IT profession, you probably notice computers when you walk into a room. If you are an optometrist, you probably notice who's wearing eyeglasses. When fashion designers walk into a room, they likely notice if someone is wearing "in" or "out of date" clothes and who made them. Building contractors walk in and notice how well rooms are constructed and put together. We ministers notice who is praying or reading their Bibles... All of these are examples of how we focus on what's relevant to us.

Let's test this. Look around where you're sitting right now for the color bright red. See if you can find a little spot of red. If you can, see if you can find another spot of red. See how many spots of bright red you can notice. Now, close your eyes and tell me where all the blue is in the room right now. How would you do? If you open your eyes and look around, you can probably see blue right away. There is generally more blue in a room than red. But where was the blue when you had red on your mind?

Our ability to focus on particular things is the work of our reticular activating system. In our brains, the reticular activating system is part of the reticular formation located in our brainstems. This system is responsible for things like balance and muscle control, our cardiovascular functions, and the modulation of pain. It is the reticular formation that also exerts control over which sensory signals reach the cerebrum and come to our conscious attention. This reticular formation enables our brains to ignore repetitive, meaningless stimuli while remaining sensitive to others. Said more plainly, it actually blinds us to or mutes particular things.<sup>1</sup>

A little over seventeen years ago, we brought baby Abby home from the hospital. Every night, we would place her in her bassinette, or later in her crib, and go on about our evening. Yet, at night, it was my reticular formation that allowed me to sleep through the sound of

the neighbor's dogs barking and the sirens and traffic sounds of the city, but immediately hear and awaken to the sound of Abby's cry. All of you who are moms and dads know this reality. It's like we have a particular wiring or a type of radar that enables us to be constantly tuned to our children and their needs.

Is that the way God is with us? Are God's ears constantly tuned to the noises his children make? If you are ever in pain or in a situation of distress, don't we want the assurance that God is aware of your cry for help and ready to respond? For the Jews of the Old Testament – those for whom the book of Psalms was both their hymnbook and prayerbook - this was the case they regularly described.

Several times throughout this *Summer in the Psalms* series, I've talked about the rituals and practices of faithful Jews. I've filled your head with Hebrew words like *Pesukei dezimra* and *Shalosh R'galim*. I've noted the regular pilgrimage observances and the particular prayers recited by our Jewish brothers and sisters. Perhaps I've done this so much that some of you wanted to say, "But Mark, that's interesting...but we're Christians, not Jews." Yet, there's been a reason for this. To understand the meaning of the psalms for us today, we have to know how they functioned in the life of ancient Israel. And that's particularly true with our scripture for this morning, Psalm 107.

Scholars note that Psalm 107 was an individual Psalm of Thanksgiving. However, they believe that over time, it was incorporated into the offering rituals of the Jerusalem Temple. In Old Testament times, when God's chosen people got into trouble, they cried out to God for help. Then, when God helped them, they promised to make a special offering in gratitude to God. These "thank" offerings were made at the Temple in Jerusalem whenever they went there on pilgrimage. And Psalm 107, scholars believe, may have been the script for these rituals.

Take just a moment to open up Bibles or pull out your devices to navigate to Psalm 107. Let's look at this script together.

The first three verses were the call to worship and the response of the faithful. A priest would call out to those gathered to make their "thank" offerings: *Oh give thanks to the Lord, for*

*He is good.* And the multitude would respond: *For his steadfast love endures forever.* This was the core belief of everything that followed. The goodness and faithfulness of God was at the center of every story. In turn, the priest would invite the redeemed of the Lord to say so – to share their stories of God’s goodness and faithfulness to them individually. And Psalm 107 contains four examples of what this celebration of God’s rescue and redemption looked like.

These four examples all follow a parallel form. First, there is a basic explanation of their trouble followed by a brief elaboration of the depth of their difficulty. That is followed by the exact same response on the part of the sufferers. “Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble...” And in every story God’s response to their cry for help is given in the same words: “and he saved them from their distress.” Then comes an explanation of exactly what God did to save them. Finally, there is a formulaic call to give thanks, repeated verbatim after each story, and a concluding line emphasizing why Israel should give thanks or how they are to do that.<sup>ii</sup>

In the selections we read from Psalm 107 this morning, we simply heard all four of the distresses. In verses four and five, what had the attention of the people was being lost in the desert, hungry and thirsty. Then verses six and seven describe how God responded:

*Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble,  
and he delivered them from their distress;  
7 he led them by a straight way,  
until they reached an inhabited town.*

Verses eight and nine describe the call to action as a result of God’s saving acts:

*Let them thank the LORD for his steadfast love,  
for his wonderful works to humankind.  
9 For he satisfies the thirsty,  
and the hungry he fills with good things.*

That was the first of the four distresses. Then, in verse ten, the pattern repeats itself a second time. What had the attention of the people this time was an experience of captivity

and forced labor. Things were dark and gloomy and miserable. Their hearts were heavy from the hard labor. But just as they did with the previous crisis, *they cried to the Lord in their trouble and he saved them from their distress*. Verse 14 says he *brought them out of darkness and gloom and broke their bonds*. This – another example of God’s steadfast love - is also worthy of thanks.

The third crisis is described in verse 17. What had the attention of the people was that *some were sick through their sinful ways, and because of their iniquities endured affliction*. They were dealing with the experience of deathly illness. Again, verse 19 shows them crying to the Lord for help, and the Lord’s response is to save them. And verse 22 describes exactly what the response should be: *to offer thanksgiving sacrifices* and to *tell of his deeds with songs of joy*.

The final predicament described in Psalm 107 comes in verse 23. Here, what had the attention of the people were the perils of journeying at sea. The pounding storms, the violent winds, and the crashing waves, which caused them to stagger about, was melting away their courage. At their wits end (which is more literally translated: “all their wisdom was swallowed up”),<sup>iii</sup> verse 27 says, they cried to the Lord, and the Lord brought them out of their distress. The proper response to this kind of delivery? Verse 32: *Let them extol him in the congregation of the people, and praise him in the assembly of the elders*.

If you look closely, you see that these four distresses allude to Israel’s history. There are echoes of the experience of the exodus – being in the wilderness, having been oppressed and in bondage, enduring affliction as a result of their sinful ways. The fourth crisis has affinities with the story of Jonah and God’s delivery of Jonah from the raging seas.

But if you look closely, you will also see that these four distresses mirror our own spiritual lives as well. We’ve been lost in sin. We’ve been trapped by the chains of sin and self. We’ve been sick unto death. (The Hebrew word translated “sick” might be better translated “foolish ones” – we’ve definitely been that). And we’ve been battered by the storms of life.

But Psalm 107 doesn’t end just with helping us see some parallels to our own stories. Look at verses 33-43:

*He turns rivers into a desert,  
springs of water into thirsty ground,  
34 a fruitful land into a salty waste,  
because of the wickedness of its inhabitants.  
35 He turns a desert into pools of water,  
a parched land into springs of water.  
36 And there he lets the hungry live,  
and they establish a town to live in;  
37 they sow fields, and plant vineyards,  
and get a fruitful yield.  
38 By his blessing they multiply greatly,  
and he does not let their cattle decrease.  
39 When they are diminished and brought low  
through oppression, trouble, and sorrow,  
40 he pours contempt on princes  
and makes them wander in trackless wastes;  
41 but he raises up the needy out of distress,  
and makes their families like flocks.  
42 The upright see it and are glad;  
and all wickedness stops its mouth.  
43 Let those who are wise give heed to these things,  
and consider the steadfast love of the LORD.*

Did you notice that the verb tenses changed in this part of the Psalm? It doesn't say he led them, or he brought them out, or he healed them, or he hushed the sea. No, here in the final eleven verses of Psalm 107, God turns rivers into deserts and deserts into pools of water. He provides food for the people and blesses them with fruitful yields and increasing livestock. He pours contempt upon the wicked and raises the needy out of their distress. No longer were the people being told to look back and to remember what God had done for them in the past. Now they were being told to look around in the present and to see what God was doing for them right then and there. The power of remembrance in the Bible is not just so that people will know history. Rather, the point of remembrance is to provide some awareness of what God has done so that they might have some expectation of what

God will do.<sup>iv</sup> And the most powerful thing Psalm 107 illustrates when it describes the steadfast love of God is that God is able and inclined to save.

We know this to be true because of Jesus Christ. In fact, we see Jesus doing the same things – providing the same kinds of rescue – in the Gospels. There we see Jesus feed the hungry in the wilderness, free those possessed from the bonds of demons, heal and forgive the sick, and quiet the storms. (Mark 6:30-44; 3:20-27; 2:1-12; 6:45-52).<sup>v</sup> And in those Gospel stories, we once again see our spiritual lives. We were lost – running from God, thinking we knew what would fulfill us - but now have been found by the strongly pursuing Savior. We were trapped by the bonds of sin and self – our own desires, deceptions, addictions, and compulsions; by our desires to follow the crowd - but we now know the freedom of forgiveness. We were spiritually sick unto death – weary, worn, physically infirm, foolish, knocked off our footings by the illnesses of others - but we’ve been given a whole and abundant and eternal life. We were battered by the storms of life – physical storms, emotional storms, spiritual storms, relational storms, economic storms - but have now found the haven of peace. What we find in these parallels is a particular assurance. The Gospel assures us that God’s grace isn’t reserved for good people who just need a bit of assistance in otherwise spotless lives. He responds in grace to folks who have royally messed up their lives by their own folly and outright rebellion.<sup>vi</sup> What each of these experiences tell us is that we have been redeemed. And being redeemed by God is at the core of our identity as one of God’s Children.

This morning, some of you can only pay attention to the pit you find yourselves deep within. Too many bills to pay...the demands of taking care of aging parents...the pressing reality that your job may soon go away...the fact that your kid is struggling with poor choices. All you can do this morning is cry out to God.

But others of you have been in similar spots in the past and are now on the other side of the crisis. You’ve been rescued by God. You’ve experienced God’s healing. You’ve experienced the sudden miracle of having just what you need to pay the bill or solve the crisis. You’ve been given the grace to press on – to live with the pain of the pit experience

in a way that it doesn't overwhelm or incapacitate you. You now have the surprising gift from God of a new orientation to life.<sup>vii</sup> If that's where you find yourself this morning, something is required of you.

What is most powerful about the thanksgiving psalm is the way in which it lays out the story of a personal deliverance as the stuff of communal celebration for the faithful. Because these thanksgiving psalms keep the memory of pit experiences and God's rescue fresh, each time they are sung, they invite us all to participate in that entire history of transformation again.<sup>viii</sup> When we tell the story of our pit experience and of God's delivery, we witness to God's action on our behalf. And for those in the pit who are listening to our stories, this helps them shift their attention from the distress to the assurance that God is listening to their cries and responding.

This week, just as we trained ourselves to focus on the color red, I want to challenge you to turn on your reticular activating systems – to focus on seeing where God is at work today. Where is God finding the lost? Where is God freeing those in bondage? Where is God healing the sick? Where are people encountering the abundant peace of Christ? And then with our attention on what God is doing, let's deliver our thanks for God's steadfast love and kindness. Because of what we have seen, because of what we know...let's say so!

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<sup>i</sup> Allen, David. *The Power of Focus*. GTD Podcast, Episode #25 – Making Change Stick. December 31, 2016. [www.gettingthingsdone.com/podcast](http://www.gettingthingsdone.com/podcast).

<sup>ii</sup> Mast, Stan. "Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22" in *The Center for Excellence in Preaching*. March 5, 2018. [https://cep.calvinseminary.edu/sermon-starters/lent-4b-2/?type=the\\_lectionary\\_psalms](https://cep.calvinseminary.edu/sermon-starters/lent-4b-2/?type=the_lectionary_psalms)

<sup>iii</sup> McCann, J. Clinton. "The Book of Psalms" in *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary, Vol. IV*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996.

<sup>iv</sup> Skinner, Douglas B. *Vertical Habits – The Thanksgiving Psalms*. Sermon preached July 14, 2013.

<sup>v</sup> Mays, James L. "Psalms" in *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994.

<sup>vi</sup> Mast.

<sup>vii</sup> Hopkins, Denise Dombkowski. *Journey Through the Psalms*. St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2002.

<sup>viii</sup> Ibid.