

“Sprung” from the Fowler’s Snare

Freed by the Hand of God

The Lesson of “Catch and Release”

When I was a boy learning to identify birds, on a number of occasions I would go with my parents to the shores of Lake Ontario to watch bird-banders at work. Banding birds is a government-authorized activity allowing naturalists to track birds’ comings and goings for scientific purposes. As birds are flying low to the ground, they are caught in nearly invisible “mist” nets, then freed and held until the bird-bander can affix to a bird’s leg a numerically inscribed metal ring that will be later used to identify the exact time and place the bird was last caught. Once the incident has been carefully logged in a journal, the bird is set free.

I vividly recall one instance in particular where we had finished banding a blue jay and then set it on its back on the hood of the car. Curiously, at first it didn’t realize that it had been released. It was only after about half a minute that it actually rolled over and flew off!

Like a captured bird set free by the trapper, God’s children simply need to realize that we’ve already been sprung loose, and take off!

The Fowler and the Snare

“Fowl” is the word used for birds in the King James Version. A fowler, then, is a trapper who captures birds. Doves, quail and partridge were some of the most delectable birds that were trapped for food in the ancient Near East.

The Bible cites many ways that were used in Bible times to trap birds. Individual ground-feeders such as partridges could be caught in baited traps that would deploy a string noose to ensnare their feet. Whole

flocks of quails and/or ducks could be captured by casting a net over the field or the pond where they were feeding. In other instances, a previously captured bird could be hidden in a cage as a decoy. Its pitiful cries would cause its kind to alight in the vicinity of a trap, where they would become easy prey.

Proverbs 7:23 (Moffatt):

... like a bird fluttering straight into the net — never dreaming its life is in danger.

Amos 3:5 (Moffatt):

Does a bird drop into the trap unless the trap is baited?
Does the trap spring up, unless there is something to catch?

Job 18:8-10 (Moffatt):

He entangles himself in a net, and sprawls within its meshes,
his heels are caught in a snare, and the trap closes on him tight,
a noose lies hid for him upon the ground, a pitfall on his path.

Escaping the Fowler's Snare

Not every ensnared bird, of course, suffered the same fate. An opportunity to escape could arise quickly should the fowler inadvertently open his hand, allowing the winged victim to fly away to safety.

Proverbs 6:5:

Deliver thyself... as a bird from the hand of the fowler.

In other instances, the captive's frantic actions might break the string noose securing its feet, allowing it to get away unharmed.

Sometimes men in their captivity can be likened to a captured bird.

The Assyrian king Sennacherib thought he had cornered and would overrun Judah. Here are the words he had inscribed about it:

“I besieged, I captured 200,150 people small and great, male and female... Hezekiah himself like a caged bird within Jerusalem, his royal city, I shut in...”

Have you ever felt like a caged bird that’s been shut in? How would you ever get out? Who would release you?

Sennacherib had boasted that his rival Hezekiah was reduced to being like a powerless caged bird, shut in and unable to get out from the trap that had been set for him. God described Israel’s ultimate release in Psalm 124 as escaping “out of the snare of the fowlers”.

Psalm 124:7:

Our soul is escaped as a bird out of the snare of the fowlers:
the snare is broken, and we are escaped.

Assyria’s Siege of Jerusalem

Sennacherib the king of Assyria’s siege and the subsequent deliverance of Judah must be an important topic to God, for He devotes chapter after chapter to it in 2 Kings, 2 Chronicles, Isaiah and Psalms. There must be lessons for our edification here, and there are.

The major players in this drama are:

- Hezekiah
 - The believing King of Judah, who with the help of God and in league with the prophet Isaiah, led Jerusalem to victory against Assyria
- Isaiah
 - God’s prophet and confidant of Hezekiah
- Sennacherib
 - The unbelieving King of Assyria who had taken Samaria and now besieged Jerusalem
- Rabshakeh
 - Sennacherib’s chief cupbearer and his personal emissary against Judah

Sennacherib's Threats

So just how was Judah able to escape as a bird out of the snare? To understand that, we'll need to go back to the start of the story.

Some twenty years earlier, the idolatrous northern kingdom of Israel had fallen to Assyria. The ten tribes of the children of Israel were then deported across the Assyrian empire while unbelieving peoples were relocated to Israel's capital of Samaria in defense against future revolt.

The southern kingdom of Judah was comprised of the two remaining tribes, Judah and Benjamin. They became Assyria's obvious target.

2 Chronicles 32:1:

After these things, and the establishment thereof, Sennacherib king of Assyria came, and entered into Judah, and encamped against the fenced cities, and thought to win them for himself.

Sennacherib's strategy was to first attack the fortified cities on the western side of Judah, and then to send his emissaries to besiege and intimidate Jerusalem, causing them to fear that they would also be invaded. Judah's ally in the fight, the Egyptian king Tirhakah (a black Pharaoh from Nubia) was apparently unable to arrive and assist in directly repelling the attack.

Rabshakeh's Reproaches

Having successfully breached the borders of Judah, the king of Assyria sent his chief cupbearer Rabshakeh to Jerusalem to shout aspersions against the city's defenders. He spoke in Hebrew rather than his native Aramaic so that everyone within earshot on the city wall could be exposed to the intimidation.

Isaiah 36:4-7, 10:

And Rabshakeh [Sennacherib's cupbearer] said unto them, Say ye now to Hezekiah, Thus saith the great king, the king of Assyria, What confidence is this wherein thou trustest?

I say, *sayest thou*, (but *they are but* vain words) *I have* counsel and strength for war: now on whom dost thou trust, that thou rebellest against me?

Lo, thou trustest in the staff of this broken reed, on Egypt; whereon if a man lean, it will go into his hand, and pierce it: so *is* Pharaoh king of Egypt to all that trust in him.

But if thou say to me, We trust in the LORD our God: *is it* not he, whose high places and whose altars Hezekiah hath taken away, and said to Judah and to Jerusalem, Ye shall worship before this altar?...

And am I now come up without the LORD against this land to destroy it? the LORD said unto me, Go up against this land, and destroy it.

Hezekiah did not want to allow these fiery darts to penetrate his own believing heart. He therefore gathered his counselors to pray for the people and beseech God on Judah's behalf.

Isaiah's Prophecies

Hezekiah then turned to the prophet Isaiah for guidance.

2 Kings 19:1-7:

And it came to pass, when king Hezekiah heard *it*, that he rent his clothes, and covered himself with sackcloth, and went into the house of the LORD.

And he sent Eliakim, which *was* over the household, and Shebna the scribe, and the elders of the priests, covered with sackcloth, to Isaiah the prophet the son of Amoz.

And they said unto him, Thus saith Hezekiah, This day *is* a day of trouble, and of rebuke, and blasphemy: for the children are come

to the birth, and *there is* not strength to bring forth [like a pregnant woman unable to deliver].

It may be the LORD thy God will hear all the words of Rabshakeh, whom the king of Assyria his master hath sent to reproach the living God; and will reprove the words which the LORD thy God hath heard: wherefore lift up *thy* prayer for the remnant that are left.

So the servants of king Hezekiah came to Isaiah.

And Isaiah said unto them, Thus shall ye say to your master, Thus saith the LORD, Be not afraid of the words which thou hast heard, with which the servants of the king of Assyria have blasphemed me.

Behold, I will send a blast upon him, and he shall hear a rumour, and shall return to his own land; and I will cause him to fall by the sword in his own land.

Hezekiah's Exhortations

After this prophetic assurance from God, Hezekiah took courage and set about to prepare the kingdom for war.

2 Chronicles 32:6-8:

And he set captains of war over the people, and gathered them together to him in the street of the gate of the city, and spake comfortably to them, saying,

Be strong and courageous, be not afraid nor dismayed for the king of Assyria, nor for all the multitude that is with him: for *there be* more with us than with him:

With him *is* an arm of flesh; but with us *is* the LORD our God to help us, and to fight our battles. And the people rested themselves upon the words of Hezekiah king of Judah.

Hezekiah was able to encourage the people because he himself had been lifted up by the words of the prophet Isaiah. He boldly exhorted the people to lay aside all doubt and to trust in the Lord their God and none other. With the promise of God's presence leading them to the victory, their hearts could be comforted and at rest.

Laying Out the Need Before God

Rabshakeh, however, had not finished his campaign of intimidation. This time he put his taunts in a letter.

Hezekiah was not going to back down. He laid the letter out in God's presence before starting to pray.

2 Kings 19:14-21a:

And Hezekiah received the letter of the hand of the messengers, and read it: and Hezekiah went up into the house of the LORD, and spread it before the LORD.

And Hezekiah prayed before the LORD, and said, O LORD God of Israel, which dwellest *between* the cherubims, thou art the God, *even* thou alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth; thou hast made heaven and earth.

LORD, bow down thine ear, and hear: open, LORD, thine eyes, and see: and hear the words of Sennacherib, which hath sent him to reproach the living God.

Of a truth, LORD, the kings of Assyria have destroyed the nations and their lands,

And have cast their gods into the fire: for they *were* no gods, but the work of men's hands, wood and stone: therefore they have destroyed them.

Now therefore, O LORD our God, I beseech thee, save thou us out of his hand, that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that thou *art* the LORD God, *even* thou only.

Then Isaiah the son of Amoz sent to Hezekiah, saying, Thus saith the LORD God of Israel,
That which thou hast prayed to me against Sennacherib king of Assyria I have heard.

This *is* the word that the LORD hath spoken concerning him;...

God's Reassurances to His People

Isaiah then proceeded to lay out all the things that God would do to set things straight. We'll pick up the record in verse 27, where God speaks to Sennacherib:

2 Kings 19:27, 28:

But I know thy abode, and thy going out, and thy coming in, and thy rage against me.

Because thy rage against me and thy tumult is come up into mine ears, therefore I will put my hook in thy nose, and my bridle in thy lips, and I will turn thee back by the way by which thou camest.

God then turns His attention to His people in Judah.

2 Kings 19:29-31:

And this *shall be* a sign unto thee, Ye shall eat this year such things as grow of themselves, and in the second year that which springeth of the same; and in the third year sow ye, and reap, and plant vineyards, and eat the fruits thereof.

And the remnant that is escaped of the house of Judah shall yet again take root downward, and bear fruit upward.

For out of Jerusalem shall go forth a remnant, and they that escape out of mount Zion: the zeal of the LORD *of hosts* shall do this.

Finally, God lays out what would be the final resolution of the conflict.

2 Kings 19:32-34:

Therefore thus saith the LORD concerning the king of Assyria, He shall not come into this city, nor shoot an arrow there, nor come before it with shield, nor cast a bank against it.

By the way that he came, by the same shall he return, and shall not come into this city, saith the LORD.

For I will defend this city, to save it, for mine own sake, and for my servant David's sake.

And look what then happened!

2 Kings 19:35-37:

And it came to pass that night, that the angel of the LORD went out, and smote in the camp of the Assyrians an hundred fourscore and five thousand [185,00!]: and when they arose early in the morning, behold, they *were* all dead corpses [I guess you can't get any deader than that!].

So Sennacherib king of Assyria departed, and went and returned, and dwelt at Nineveh.

And it came to pass, as he was worshipping in the house of Nisroch his god, that Adrammelech and Sharezer his sons smote him with the sword: and they escaped into the land of Armenia. And Esarhaddon his son reigned in his stead.

Who could have anticipated this ending to the saga? Too often, we look to men for deliverance and fail to acknowledge that the LORD God with His Son Jesus Christ is our one and only true Deliverer. When we relinquish the battle to Him and refuse to take the responsibility back, we can rest in the knowledge that He will take care of the things beyond our control.

Hezekiah's Songs of the Degrees

In the Book of Psalms, the "Songs of the Degrees" (Psalms 120-134) celebrate Hezekiah's deliverance. Each of these psalms bears the label "A Song of the Degrees."

There are fifteen Songs of the Degrees in total.

- Fifteen (15) corresponds to the number of years God added to Hezekiah's life after his sickness unto death during Sennacherib's siege of Jerusalem.

Ten of the Songs of the Degrees were written by Hezekiah himself.

- Ten (10) corresponds to the number of degrees by which God caused the sundial to go backward as a sign that He would heal Hezekiah.

Let's take a look at some of the keys to deliverance recounted in these psalms. We'll consider:

- Looking to the Lord as our Keeper
- Looking to the Lord as our Master
- Trusting God for peace
- Trusting God for justice
- Trusting God for deliverance

Looking to the Lord as Our Keeper

Psalm 121:1, 2:

I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help.

My help *cometh* from the LORD, which made heaven and earth.

God Who made heaven and earth doesn't dwell in temples made with hands. Note in the next three verses the repeated uses of the word "keep."

Psalm 121:3-6:

He will not suffer thy foot to be moved: he that keepeth thee will not slumber.

Behold, he that keepeth Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep.

The LORD *is* thy keeper: the LORD *is* thy shade upon thy right hand.

The sun shall not smite thee by day, nor the moon by night.

Note in the next two verses the repeated uses of the word “preserve.” The Lord will keep, keep, keep us and preserve, preserve, preserve us.

Psalm 121:7,8:

The LORD shall preserve thee from all evil: he shall preserve thy soul.

The LORD shall preserve thy going out and thy coming in from this time forth, and even for evermore.

Looking to the Lord as our Master

When we look with expectancy to God and not men, He can show His marvelous mercy, leading us up and out.

Psalm 123:1-4:

Unto thee lift I up mine eyes, O thou that dwellest in the heavens.

Behold, as the eyes of servants *look* unto the hand of their masters, *and* as the eyes of a maiden unto the hand of her mistress; so our eyes *wait* upon the LORD our God, until that he have mercy upon us.

Have mercy upon us, O LORD, have mercy upon us: for we are exceedingly filled with contempt.

Our soul is exceedingly filled with the scorning of those that are at ease, *and* with the contempt of the proud.

Trusting God for Peace

Psalm 125:1-5:

They that trust in the LORD *shall be* as mount Zion, *which* cannot be removed, *but* abideth for ever.

As the mountains *are* round about Jerusalem, so the LORD *is* round about his people from henceforth even for ever.

For the rod of the wicked shall not rest upon the lot of the righteous; lest the righteous put forth their hands unto iniquity.

Do good, O LORD, unto *those that be good*, and to *them that are upright* in their hearts.

As for such as turn aside unto their crooked ways, the LORD shall lead them forth with the workers of iniquity: *but peace shall be* upon Israel.

Trusting God for Justice

A common temptation is to become discouraged when justice is not rendered in the here and now. But we need not worry ourselves about that, for God is Righteous and will see to it that all is repaid.

Psalm 129:4-7:

The LORD *is* righteous: he hath cut asunder the cords of the wicked.

Let them all be confounded and turned back that hate Zion.

Let them be as the grass *upon* the housetops, which withereth afore it groweth up:

Wherewith the mower filleth not his hand; nor he that bindeth sheaves his bosom.

Trusting God for Deliverance

Our enemies' ability to wreak havoc may seem on the verge of overwhelming us. From a senses point of view, it can seem as if all our defenses have been destroyed. However, when we recognize our Helper is Lord of heaven and earth, we can rise up to believe God and become "the ones that got away."

Psalm 124:1-6:

If *it had not been* the LORD who was on our side, now may Israel say;

If *it had not been* the LORD who was on our side, when men rose up against us:

Then they had swallowed us up quick, when their wrath was kindled against us:

Then the waters had overwhelmed us, the stream had gone over our soul:

Then the proud waters had gone over our soul.

Blessed *be* the LORD, who hath not given us *as* a prey to their teeth.

Our soul is escaped as a bird out of the snare of the fowlers: the snare is broken, and we are escaped.

Our help *is* in the name of the LORD, who made heaven and earth.

Psalm 91:3,4:

Surely he shall deliver thee from the snare of the fowler, *and* from the noisome [deadly] pestilence.

He shall cover thee with his feathers, and under his wings shalt thou trust: his truth *shall be thy* shield and buckler.

Psalm 55:6:

And I said, Oh that I had wings like a dove! *for then* would I fly away, and be at rest.

Today we rest on the accomplished work of Jesus Christ for our deliverance. We know and believe that with respect to our victory, “It is finished.”

Martin Luther aptly sums this up in the hymn “A Mighty Fortress is Our God”.

Did we in our own strength confide,
Our striving would be losing;
Were not the right man on our side,
The man of God’s own choosing.
Dost ask who that may be?
Christ Jesus, it is he.
Lord Jesus Christ his name,
From age to age the same,
And he must win the battle.

Thank God our Savior that through His Son Jesus Christ, He has sprung us loose from every form of oppression and slavery. Let’s look to the Master for justice and deliverance, knowing the ultimate victory is ours.