

# “Surrounded”

Psalm 22 <sup>1</sup>

The year was 1754, and the nations of Europe were in a great contest of claiming and counter-claiming territory in North America. Governor Dinwiddie of Virginia sent young Lieutenant Colonel George Washington to Fort LeBeouf in the disputed Ohio Territory—not far from today’s Pittsburgh—to tell the French to “get out.” Upon their refusal to do so, Governor Dinwiddie sent Washington back in March of 1754 with more troops to push the French out.

As Washington made his way toward Fort Duquesne, a scouting party of his men encountered a French scouting party in the Battle of Jumonville Glen. Although the accounts differ, it appears that an Indian chieftain allied with Washington executed the French Captain “in cold blood,” which Washington knew would lead to larger conflict.

Retreating to Great Meadows with about 150 men, Washington proceeded to throw together what he called “Fort Necessity.” The French soon attacked with overwhelming force, and Washington’s outnumbered men were not able to effectively return fire due to being exposed in torrential rain.

Washington was surrounded, and, although the battle was going solidly in favor of the French, their Captain expected Washington to receive reinforcements straightaway in numbers the French could not withstand. With this in mind, the French offered Washington the opportunity to surrender, if he would agree to leave “their territory.” Washington signed the surrender document on July 4, 1754—his only career surrender—which must have made the Declaration of Independence, twenty-two years later, on July 4, 1776, that much sweeter to him.<sup>2</sup>

One hundred and ninety years after Fort Necessity, during Christmas week, 1944, another group of American soldiers was surrounded in the Belgian town of Bastogne during the Battle of the Bulge, also facing certain death until General Patton’s 3<sup>rd</sup> Army was able to rescue them. Being “surrounded” in one fashion or another is an experience that many of us have had, and on this night that we call “Good Friday,” we gather to remember the most significant “being surrounded” in human history. If you have your Bible, please open it to Psalm 22 as we read these words:

*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from my cries of anguish? My God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer, by night, but I find no rest. . . . Many bulls **surround** me; strong bulls of Bashan **encircle** me. Roaring lions that tear their prey open their mouths wide against me. I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint. My heart has turned to wax; it has melted within me. My mouth is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth; you lay me in the dust of death. Dogs **surround** me, a pack of villains **encircles** me; they pierce my hands and my feet. All my bones are on display; people stare and gloat over me. They divide my clothes among them and cast lots for my garment (Psalm 22:1-2, 12-18).*

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<sup>1</sup> A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on April 14, 2017 – Good Friday.

<sup>2</sup> To greatly shorten what happened next, hostilities between France and England continued to escalate from that point, resulting in the beginning of The Seven Years’ War (known as “The French & Indian War” in the United States) two years later. The Seven Years’ War, considered by many to be the first “world war,” ended in crushing victory by the British that established Britain as the preeminent world power of the next century. And it was to avenge this crushing defeat at the hands of the British that France sided with the revolting American colonies a few years later.

While we have no idea what circumstances gave rise to King David's words, this poem might have been written during Absalom's effort to seize his father's throne. And from the earliest days of the Church, these words have been understood to foretell some of the most signal events of Jesus' crucifixion—and Jesus Himself used the first words of this psalm in what we call "The Cry of Desolation," or "The 4<sup>th</sup> Word from the Cross" (Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34).

These verses describe Jesus' sense of being surrounded, and there were at least two senses in which this was true. Jesus' being surrounded by "dogs" and "villains" described the soldiers and officials who were carrying out His physical crucifixion. And His being surrounded by "lions and bulls of Bashan" described the forces of spiritual darkness who thought they had finally succeeded in destroying Him who had come to save us. Let's think about this some more.

Bjorn Nilsen was six years old. He had a temperature of 102.5. His parents gave him some Children's Advil, and over about an hour his fever went down to 100. At bedtime, his temperature was up again, so he got more Advil. But this time, Bjorn's fever continued to rise, and by midnight, his fever was 104.

When his father woke him to take him to the hospital, Bjorn asked quietly, "Am I going to die, Daddy?" Although he, too, was afraid, Bjorn's father answered, "No, Bjorn, you're not going to die. We just need some help in getting your fever down." But long ago, from Calvary's Cross, Jesus cried out to His Father, "Daddy, Daddy, am I going to die?" And His Father's anguished response was "**Yes.**"<sup>3</sup>

We sometimes carelessly use the phrase, "come hell or high water." On that awful Friday afternoon, Hell did come, and all of Hell's fury was vented upon our Lord in a final, desperate attempt to destroy Him. And as the penalty for all of my Sin, and all of your Sin, was poured out upon the Father's only Son, the Father turned away . . . and wept.

**We'll never know how much it cost to see our sin upon that Cross.** No person has ever been so alone as Jesus was in those unspeakable moments, and no person will ever be so alone again. As Rick Warren put it, "If God never did *anything* else for you, He would still deserve your continual praise for the rest of your life because of what Jesus did for you on the cross."<sup>4</sup>

Ryan White—not the famous one—had over thirty surgeries in the first fifteen years of his life. When Ryan was eight years old, he was being rolled toward the operating room once again. When the gurney reached the doors into surgery, Ryan sat up in bed, looked his father in the eyes, and begged, "Dad, don't let them take me!"

Tim, his father, wrote that "At that moment, my heart was broken. I would have done anything to take him off that bed, except for the fact that he had to have the surgery; but that knowledge didn't ease the pain in my heart at all. I just stood there trembling as the doors closed, and he disappeared. That is when I broke down into tears."

Later that afternoon, Tim remembered another cry much like Ryan's. This one rose up in the darkness from an olive grove outside Jerusalem, but the meaning of the words was the same: "Daddy, Daddy, don't let them take me!" And as he remembered this, Tim wrote, "It has been

<sup>3</sup> Per Nilsen, Burnsville, Minnesota, [www.preachingtoday.com](http://www.preachingtoday.com).

<sup>4</sup> Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life: What On Earth Am I Here For?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), p. 112.

said that something is worth what someone else is willing to pay. Jesus' willingness to give His life for me shows the value He placed on me."<sup>5</sup>

**The way we determine the value of something is by the amount that someone is willing to pay for it. That's true about you, too.**

Have you ever thought about how we measure the size of a fire? We measure the size of a fire by the number of firefighters and fire engines sent to fight against it. We measure the seriousness of a medical condition by the amount of risk the doctors take in prescribing dangerous drugs or surgical procedures. And we measure the gravity of Sin and the vastness of God's love for us by looking at the magnitude of what God has done for us in Jesus, the Son of God who became like a common criminal for our sake and in our place.<sup>6</sup>

So why can't God just forgive the debt of Sin? Why did Jesus have to die? If our Creator was truly generous, couldn't He just move on without repayment? Live and let live?

Well, here's the problem: **someone always eats the cost of sin.** As a simple example, let's say your neighbor crashes his car through your fence. When you discover the shambles, you forgive him: "Don't worry about the fence! All is forgiven." But forgiving your neighbor doesn't do away with the bill or dissolve the damage; it means that you eat the cost yourself.

Now consider a more complex example. During the U.S. housing crisis, shoddy banking practices, fat-cat executives, and corporate corruption threw a sledgehammer into the global economy. Now, imagine that you have been installed in the aftermath as the new CEO of one of the massive corporations guilty for the crisis. The old CEO is out the door; a new boss is in town. You are personally innocent: you weren't at the helm when the ship got steered into the rocks. But the huge debt is still there.

The Bank of America alone owed its investors \$17 billion, and someone has to pay those costs. And you know what actually happened: in the aftermath of the housing crisis, the banks were deemed "too big to fail," and the government forgave the debt, covering the most expensive bailout in history.

Even though the banking industry had caused massive damage, damage from which our retirement savings will never, ever recover, the debt was forgiven. But the debt didn't go away. Someone else covered it—in *this case, we did*. Someone always eats the cost.

**That's what happened at the Cross: God was "eating" the cost of our sin. God forgave our debt by covering the cost Himself.** And our government's bailout of the 2008 malefactors wasn't actually the most expensive bailout in history. The most expensive bailout was when the Father established Jesus as the new CEO of a fantastically corrupt corporation called Humanity, Inc. and together, in the power of their Spirit, they took upon themselves the most outrageous debt-forgiveness plan the cosmos has ever known. That's what happened at the Cross. God was surrounded by our Sin, and there was no rescue.<sup>7</sup>

The truth of the matter is that we can only guess about what was happening during those awful hours on the cross, and it's likely that we'll never really understand it. But we do know that "*God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the*

<sup>5</sup> Tim White, Bronte, Texas, [www.preachingtoday.com](http://www.preachingtoday.com).

<sup>6</sup> Adapted from Fleming Rutledge, *The Undoing of Death: Sermons for Holy Week and Easter* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), pp. 118-119.

<sup>7</sup> Joshua Ryan Butler, *The Pursuing God* (Thomas Nelson, 2017), p. 100.

*righteousness of God* (2 Corinthians 5:21). What we do know is that somehow, in those last few awful hours of Jesus' earthly life, all of the hatred, all of the murder, all of the betrayal, all of the abuse, all of the adultery, all of the warfare, all of the holocaust, all of the Sin that humankind had ever committed or would ever commit was concentrated in Jesus' spirit as He himself *willingly* paid the penalty . . . for us.

John R. W. Stott was an Anglican clergyman who was ranked by *TIME* magazine as one of the 100 most influential people in the world. John Stott wrote that **"I could never believe in God if it were not for the cross.** In the real world of pain, how could one worship a God who was immune to it? I turn to that lonely, twisted, tortured figure on the cross, nails through hands and feet, back lacerated, limbs wrenched, brow bleeding from thorns, mouth dry, and intolerably thirsty, plunged in God-forsaken darkness. That is the God for me. He set aside his immunity to pain. He entered our world of flesh and blood, tears and death."<sup>8</sup>

Carl Bates, a former President of the Baptist General Convention of Texas, of the Baptist Convention of North Carolina, and of the Southern Baptist Convention, has suggested that the Cross of Jesus has a more fundamental meaning than that of human redemption from the evil we have created—although it is that. According to Bates, **the deepest meaning of the Cross is that the Cross was God's way of taking responsibility for having created a world in which evil is possible**, taking into the Divine Being the enormity of suffering that has ensued and rendering it impotent with respect to eternity.<sup>9</sup>

I don't know about you, but I find myself agreeing with Dr. Stott and Dr. Bates. I don't want a God who is separate from my pain. I want a God who knows what life is like for me, who cares what life is like for me, and who transforms my suffering into victory.

I want a God who takes responsibility for having made evil possible, even as God holds me accountable for having made evil actual, as I have done again . . . and again . . . and again. And the Good News is that this is indeed the kind of God we have.

Anglican Bishop N.T. Wright tells a story about a bishop who was hearing confessions of sin from three calloused teenagers in the church. All three boys were trying to make a joke out of it, so they met with the bishop and confessed to a long list of ridiculous and grievous sins that they had not committed. The whole thing was a joke to them.

The bishop, seeing through their tasteless joke, played along with the first two, who ran out of the church laughing. But then he listened carefully to the third prankster, and before the third teen left, the bishop told him, "Okay, you have confessed these sins. Now I want you to do something to show your repentance. I want you to walk up to the far end of the church and I want you to look at the picture of Jesus hanging on the cross, and I want you to look at his face and say, 'You did all that for me and I don't care that much.' And I want you to do that three times."

And so the boy went up to the front of the church, looked at the picture of Jesus and said, "You did all that for me and I don't care that much." And then he said it again, but he couldn't say it the third time because he broke down in tears. And the bishop telling the story said, "The reason I know that story is that I was that young man."

<sup>8</sup> John R. W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (InterVarsity, 1986).

<sup>9</sup> Carl Bates, sermon at Lakeside Baptist Church, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, June 5, 1983. See also Elie Wiesel, *Night* (New York: Bantam, 1982), pp. 61-62.

Bishop Wright went on to say that “There is something about the Cross. Something about Jesus dying there for us that leaps over all the theoretical discussions, all the possibilities of how we explain it this way or that way, and it grips us. And when we are gripped by the Cross, we somehow have a sense that what is really grasping us is the love of God.”<sup>10</sup>

Tim Keller, Pastor of Redeemer Lutheran Church on Times Square, has put the Gospel in one sentence: “**My friend, you’re more sinful than you ever dared to believe; and you’re more loved than you ever dared to hope.**”<sup>11</sup>

When asked about his favorite Bible verse, Archbishop Desmond Tutu responded, “My favorite verse is Romans 5:8: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. It sums up the Gospel wonderfully. We think we have to impress God so that God could love us. But God says, ‘No, you are loved already, even at your worst.’”<sup>12</sup>

When I was with my Dad during his last stay in the hospital before his death, many of the procedures that were necessary in the course of his treatment were both undignified and painful. Because Dad couldn’t hear, and because his mental faculties were dulled through disease and pain, most of the time he had very little idea about what was going on. Sometimes I simply had to write to him, “Dad, you know I wouldn’t allow these things to happen unless I was convinced that they were for your good. *You’ll just have to trust me.*”

John Olerud, who played first base for five major league teams, wrote that “Sometimes in our suffering, we look to God and say, ‘God, this does not make any sense. I’m getting hammered here, [I’m surrounded,] and you could change that.’ And I’m sure God is looking at us and saying, ‘I can’t tell you why I’m doing this, but it is in your best interest. *You just have to trust me.*”<sup>13</sup>

My friends, when we consider God’s eternal Design, the fact of the matter is that what we consider “happiness” is not God’s primary goal in our lives. God does desire our happiness, but in far greater intensity than what we’re willing to settle for; and when God has finished shaping us into His image, we will be happier than we have ever imagined possible.<sup>14</sup>

We have a God who understands our pain. We have a God who has paid our debt. We have a God who is fully, completely, and eternally Trustworthy. It is true that we are surrounded. And on this night, of all nights, we remember that what surrounds us is God’s Love.

Thanks be to God for this Indescribable Gift!

<sup>10</sup> Adapted from N. T. Wright, “Grasped by the Love of God,” N. T. Wright Online.

<sup>11</sup> Tim Keller, in the sermon *Treasure Versus Money*, [www.preachingtoday.com](http://www.preachingtoday.com).

<sup>12</sup> Desmond Tutu, “10 Questions,” *TIME* (3.22.10), 4.

<sup>13</sup> Adapted from John Olerud, *The Boston Globe*, 6.24.05, pp. D1, D6.

<sup>14</sup> C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan, 1962), p. 48.