

The University of Notre Dame lost its football game yesterday, but overall it has begun the season well this year. I was talking about it with a priest from another diocese last week, and he explained it to me this way: “God does not have a favorite football team, but our Blessed Mother does.”

When things are going right for your football team, your family, or your job, it’s easy to live with a happy heart. Sometimes we even forget to thank God for the blessings we receive. We are more likely to say thanks if we overcame a struggle with God’s help. A friend of mine recently underwent surgery for breast cancer. She asked her family and friends to pray for her. The surgery was successful and the cancer has been stopped. She is offering prayers of thanks to God – probably more than she thanked God for her good health in the years before this diagnosis.

Today’s responsorial psalm is a beautiful prayer of thanks, written by someone who escaped death. It goes, “The cords of death encompassed me; the snares of the netherworld seized upon me.” We don’t know specifically how this person nearly died, but that’s what makes this psalm so useful. We can pray it anytime we feel we are in great danger. It goes on, “I fell into distress and sorrow, and I called upon the name of the Lord, ‘O Lord, save my life!’” So this is a situation many of us experience – we face a threat, and we pray.

In this case, the prayers were answered. The psalm goes, “I was brought low, and God saved me - has freed my soul from death, my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling.” The person who wrote this psalm had a happy heart. God heard the prayer, so the psalm draws this conclusion about God: “Gracious is the Lord and just; yes, our God is merciful.” The very first line goes, “I love the Lord because he has heard my voice.” God so touched this particular person, that the psalm rings out with confidence, “I will walk before the Lord, in the land of the living.”

But to be honest, things don’t always go our way. We may pray for healing, for a new job, for good grades at school and not get what we want. It would be nice to say with confidence, “I will walk before the Lord, in the land of the living,” but sometimes it is hard to walk, sometimes the Lord seems not present, and sometimes we tend more toward dying than toward living.

That is why the church invites us to sing this psalm on the day we hear this gospel. Jesus predicts his passion and tells people if you want to follow him, you must take up a cross. If you lose your life for his sake, you will save it. Discipleship is not a life where everything goes right; it’s a life where some things go wrong. But we accept this cross thinking about the big picture. We will sacrifice, but others may have a better life because of it, and we may experience weakness in this life, but we can look forward to eternal life. We may for a time face distress, but in the end we will walk before the Lord in the land of the living. That hope gives us a happy heart as we strive on through life’s hardest days.