

2. Faith under attack

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[0 : 00] Now let's pray together. Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations.

Before the mountains were brought forth, wherever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting, you are God.

God our Father, you are great and we are small. You are wise and we are foolish. You are strong and we are weak.

You are holy and we are sinful. You are eternal and we are mortal. And yet, in your very greatness is our hope, the hope that you can take all that is sinful, mortal, rebellious and unholy in us and transform that, make us into those who are climbing towards the holy city, those who are travelling to the city whose builder and architect is God.

So we have come to listen for some moments to your voice, your voice speaking to us, not just as you once spoke long ago in those ancient words, but those words which are powerful, those words which are eternal, those words which, unlike heaven and earth, will never pass away.

[1 : 30] And so we come to you, Lord, with all our varied circumstances. Some of us are disappointed. Things that we had hoped would happen have not happened. People we trusted have let us down.

Circumstances we had hoped would turn out favourably have not. Some of us are angry. We cannot understand why things have happened in our lives.

Particularly we have tried to be faithful. And yet, things have gone in a way that we feel go against your promises and against your care.

Some of us are filled with grief. We have struggled against temptations. And we have not succeeded. Holy living has eluded us.

And our lives are a mess. Some of us have come with, in depression, feeling that life has gone grey. And there is nothing to look forward to.

[2 : 34] Father, there are so many obstacles and dangers in our human lives and in our Christian pilgrimage. And yet we believe that through your riches in glory, in Christ Jesus, you are able to meet and to satisfy all these needs.

As we pray for ourselves, we do not forget the wider world outside. The feelings, the experiences, the emotions, the thoughts represented here are mirrored millions of times over outside this building across the country and across the world.

And we thank you for this glorious gospel. The gospel that is the power of God to salvation for all who believe. the life-changing power that does not take away the problems, that does not take away the difficulties, but assures us of your love and of your care.

As we meet together for these moments, we pray that you will impress these truths deeply into our hearts. In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.

And so we turn now to our reading, which is on page 517 in the Bibles there. And we're going to read the next three Psalms.

[3 : 57] We're looking at this group of 15 Psalms in groups of three. The Psalms begin in a time and place of great difficulty and lead on to Zion, the city of God.

I suggested last week that each of the three Psalms in miniature reflects that pattern. So, first of all, Psalm 1, 2, 3, a song of ascents.

To you I lift up my eyes, O you who are enthroned in the heavens. Behold, as the eyes of servants look to the hand of their master, as the eyes of a maid servant to the hand of her mistress.

So our eyes look to the Lord our God, till he has mercy upon us. Have mercy upon us, O Lord. Have mercy. For we have had more than enough of contempt.

Our soul has had more than enough of the scorn of those who are at ease, of the contempt, of the proud. Psalm 1, 2, 4 now, which is also a song of ascents, and this time from David himself.

[5 : 02] If it had not been the Lord who was on our side, let Israel now say, If it had not been the Lord who was on our side when people rose up against us, then they would have swallowed us up alive when their anger was kindled against us.

Then the flood would have swept us away, the torrent would have gone over us. Then over us would have gone the raging waters. Blessed be the Lord who has not given us as prey to their teeth.

We have escaped like a bird from the snare of the fowlers. The snare is broken, and we have escaped. Then Psalm 125, Those who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion, which cannot be moved, but abides forever.

As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the Lord surrounds his people from this time forth and forevermore. For the scepter of wickedness shall not rest on the land allotted to the righteous, lest the righteous stretch out their hands to do wrong.

Do good, O Lord, to those who are good and to those who are upright in their hearts. For those who turn aside to their crooked ways, the Lord will lead away with evildoers.

[6 : 22] Peace be upon Israel. Amen, and may God bless to us that reading from his word. Songs for climbers.

And I would have to say the Christian life is a marathon. It's not a sprint. Marathons require different disciplines and different preparation.

Now, I don't run marathons. That revelation will come as a surprise to no one. But my son is quite an accomplished marathon runner and especially in the days when he was still living at home, the month-long preparation, the discipline, the commitment, the sheer effort that went into this.

And then, of course, the race itself. He always says, when you get to about the tenth mile, then things start to look very bleak. You start running, the adrenaline is flowing, and then about the tenth mile, he realised there's much more to go than has still happened.

In other words, for marathons, for Christian living, for climbing the mountain of Zion, we need sticking power. We need staying power. A sprint is one thing.

[7 : 39] You can do that and get it over and then flop. And these psalms here, these three psalms, are telling us about the time when the climb becomes difficult, when the pressure is mounting, the need for stickability.

One of the people who showed greatest sticking power was Winston Churchill, not just during the Second World War, but during the 1930s, when almost as a lone voice, he was warning of the dangers of coming war.

And one time after the war, he returned to his old school harrow at speech day and what he said was summed up in a very short phrase.

What he said to the school boys was this, Never, never, never give in. That's essentially what these psalms are saying.

The climb is tough. The climb is difficult. But never, never, never give in. Not, of course, never give in because of your grit and your determination, although we need that, but never, never, never give in because God is with you.

[8 : 53] God is supporting you and God will bring you to the destination. But the problem is this, isn't it? God calls us to pilgrimage. He commands us to follow him.

He promises us wonderful things. and then very often our experiences seem to contradict the promises. So often this happens in people's lives.

They start off the Christian life. They start off the climb, if you like, up the hill of Zion. Before very long, things go badly wrong. The experiences of life seem to contradict God's promises.

At these times, we need to take the words of the old hymn, trust and obey, because there really is no other way but to trust the promises and obey the commands.

But the Samists are saying here, one of them is David in 1, 2, 4. We don't know who the other two are in 1, 2, 3 and 1, 2, 5. What they are saying is this, they are not saying, keep on going because you're tough, because you'll make it.

[10 : 04] They are saying, keep on going because of three great truths about God which are embodied in these psalms. And in Psalm 123, the first great encouragement to keep on going and not to give up is that God is above us.

1, 2, 3, 1. To you I lift up my eyes, O you who are enthroned in the heavens. See, one of the problems of a period of great difficulty, of great depression is our eyes are down. We're concentrating on the problem, concentrating on the immediate. If we are ploughing a thorough and not lifting our eyes beyond it, our eyes are downwards. The Samist says we need to lift our eyes upwards.

Not because the problem isn't there, not because the problem isn't real, but unless we look upwards, we are going to become totally, totally dominated by the problem.

And just two things about this. In verse 2, this is the last phrase, Our eyes look to the Lord, our God, till he has mercy upon us.

[11:15] This word, till, is important. Sometimes in his wonderful grace, the Lord answers prayers immediately. But as any of us who have any experience in the Christian life know, that more often than not, a long time passes.

Till he answers. Basically it says, keep on praying, keep on trusting. It doesn't say, if he answers. Notice, so our eyes look to the Lord, our God, to see if he will have mercy upon us.

No, there's no doubt. Till he have mercy upon us. This is the Lord, the covenant keeping God, who will keep his promise in face of all the odds.

In other words, we need to look up. But also verse 2, as the eyes of servants, and the eyes of a maid servant, it's not something magical. It's not, it's not that we're going to pray as if it were some kind of slot machine, and the answer pops out.

That's not Bible teaching about prayer. Bible teaching about prayer is we need to submit to our master who sees everything. See, the point is, the psalmist doesn't see everything, and we don't see everything, but the one enthroned in the heavens sees everything.

[12:37] And I think these last verses, verses 3 and 4, are particularly appropriate for us in this country. We, on the whole, do not suffer persecution in this country, in the West.

Many of our brothers and sisters do suffer terribly. But what we do suffer a great deal in this country is contempt, and scorn, and ridicule. One of the things that makes it most difficult to keep on climbing, to keep on going, is the contempt, the mockery, the ridicule, the sneers.

That's what happens to the gospel in this country. The sneers of the media, the sneers of the small elite of people who control public opinion. We need to look up.

We need to get out of the situation. When I lived in Durham for many years, one of the things I used to enjoy occasionally was to climb to the top of the tower of Durham Cathedral.

It's quite a climb, actually. When I was younger and fitter in those days. Anyway, in the Durham Cathedral rises up from a cluster of very characterful but very cramped streets.

[13:51] If you're standing in the shadow there, you can feel overwhelmed. If you climb up to the top of the tower, on a good day, you can see the whole of the north of England. Panorama spreading out before you.

And others will know other places where you can do that kind of thing. That's what the psalmist is saying. God is above us. Don't concentrate on the problem. Concentrate on the God who is above us.

Psalms 124 is clearly talking about a different situation. Battles, floods, raging waters, and so on. And here he is saying God is alongside us.

He's not just above us, he's by our side. If it had not been the Lord who was on our side, if it had not been the Lord who was on our side, looking up is important, but also important is the presence of the Lord in the midst of the actual, in the actual difficulties.

When people rose up against us, he had swallowed us up alive. The image here is of violence, of floods, of wild beasts and traps. But notice, ultimately, it is not the climbers, not the pilgrims who are destroyed, it is the snare, the enemies.

[15:06] Verse 7, we have escaped like a bird from the snare of the fowls. The snare is broken and we have escaped. Now, if you read the story of David in 1 and 2 Samuel, you'll probably find many circumstances which that could apply to because David, for much of the early part of his life, was pursued relentlessly by Saul through the mountains and hills of Judea and often was in real danger as well as in danger from Philistines and others.

But notice, verse 1, widens this out. Let Israel now say, let all God's people say. That's what he's saying. It's no accident, this psalm has often been used in times of great crisis, including great national crisis.

The Covenanters, this was a particular favourite of theirs when they were harried and chased over the mountains and the caves. And at times of war and times of trouble, this psalm has been a great strength to faith.

But notice, the key to the psalm is actually verse 8. Now, this echoes the words we looked at last week in Psalm 121. Our help is in the name of the Lord who made heaven and earth.

And notice the addition here. The psalmist in Psalm 121 says, my help comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth. Here he says, our help is in the name of the Lord.

[16:39] Now that's terribly important because the name of the Lord, the name of the covenant Lord, means that this is someone we can trust. If God is for us, who can be against us?

And if he made heaven and earth, none of these problems of heaven and earth, floods, torrents, snares, fowlers, and so on, could possibly, can possibly, ultimately harm.

It's a very interesting verse, verse 7. We have escaped like a bird from the snare of the fowler. I often wonder if in a much later generation, King Hezekiah, one of David's worthiest sons, had read and contemplated this psalm when he was shut up in the city surrounded by the Assyrian armies. Because the fascinating thing is, the Assyrian king Sennacherib, in his records which have been discovered, says, Hezekiah, king of Judah, I shut up like a caged bird in his city and thought, of course, that he had won.

And that's a very good illustration from scripture itself, of help being in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth. So God is above us.

[18:02] God is alongside us. But in Psalm 125, God is around us. He surrounds us on every side. Those who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion, which cannot be moved, but abides forever.

As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the Lord surrounds his people from this time forth and forevermore. Once again, the background of this, Sam, maybe of occupying armies besieging Jerusalem, has got a far wider application than this.

And notice, first of all, what happens if God is around us. First of all, we have stability, cannot be moved, but abides forever.

We are built on secure foundations by the Lord himself. And once again in verse 2, from this time forth and forevermore.

You see, the Samist is moving forwards and backwards through time, isn't he? He's looking back at God's past deliverances. He's thinking about God's present presence, but he's also thinking about the future.

[19:19] forever. He's the forever here tells us that this help in the past and this strength in the present, there's never going to be a time when this ceases.

Now, one of the problems, of course, about trusting in human help in circumstances and in feelings is that inevitably, I'm not just talking about people letting us down, I'm talking about inevitably, in human circumstances, people will fail.

Circumstances will change. Feelings will come and go. This is different from this time forth and forevermore. That phrase forever is so important because that's at the very heart of the Christian gospel.

There is help in the present. There is strength in the present. There is blessing in the present. But the ultimate blessing is yet to come forever more.

And that's something we need to keep on reminding ourselves and keep on holding on to. So there is stability. There is also the reality of God's presence. The Lord is repeated four times, verse 1, verse 2, verse 4 and verse 5.

[20:37] The Lord, the Lord, the Lord. And what these later verses, verses 3 to 5, are talking about is the difference that the presence of the Lord makes.

You know, this verse 4, do good, O Lord, to those who are good. Now that sounds awfully like, as if he's asking the Lord, say, oh, people who are already good look after them, but people who turn aside forget about them.

That's not what he's saying at all. What he's talking about is the response that people make to the presence of the Lord ultimately determines their eternal destiny, the forevermore.

Do good to those who are good, to those who are upright in their hearts. And the word good, as always throughout the Old Testament, isn't just a vague general thing. The word good means fulfill your purposes for which you created them.

Remember the creation story God made, and it was good. And what the psalmist is saying, those who are the climbers on the hill of Zion, those who are pilgrims, you are going to fulfill your purpose towards them.

[21 : 51] And those who turn aside to their crooked ways, you notice it's always possible. There's always other roads, of course. If you find the climb to Zion difficult, there's always a temptation to go down other roads.

So the difference is salvation and judgment. That ultimately is why we need to keep on going. So you see there's comprehensive protection.

God is above us. God is alongside us and God surrounds us. As the hymn says, God is round about me and can I be dismayed?

So as we finish, let me just say two things, it is tough. It does need sticking power. It is a marathon, not a sprint. And you don't begin marathons thinking they are sprints.

And if you begin the Christian life thinking it's just a happy dash to Zion, then you're going to be bitterly disappointed. The second thing I want to say is that our companion on that pilgrimage is above us, beside us, and round about us.

[23 : 05] And because of that, not only will we be protected through these difficulties and through these dangers, but he will inevitably bring us safely to the destination.

As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the Lord surrounds his people. As I said last week, this is a great message, whatever stage you may be at, whether you are flagging and disappointed, whether you are, whether you had a sudden burst of energy, through sometimes the Lord and his goodness gives us, or even whether you are wondering if you ought to begin this journey at all. Take courage and keep on going. Amen. Amen. Let's pray. Lord God, we thank you that on this journey, on this climb, we are not left to our own resources, that there is no possibility that any of your people will ultimately fall by the wayside, or that any of your people will fail to reach thy and the city of God.

Help us now as we continue the normal business of the day and go back to all those things which are so difficult, and help us to go back to them with the assurance and the courage that he has given to us by these great sounds, and help us to be those who trust in the Lord, and to be like Mount Zion, which cannot be moved, but abides forever.

We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.