

4. Pressing on

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[0 : 00] Now let's pray. Pray in the words of the psalmist, Praise the Lord, praise God in his sanctuary. Praise him in his mighty heavens.

Praise him for his mighty deeds. Praise him with the trumpet, the lute and the harp. Praise him with sounding cymbals. Praise him with loud clashing cymbals. Let everything that has breath praise the Lord.

Lord, our Father, we know that you have made us for yourself. And our hearts can find no rest until they find it in you.

You have given to us our lives. You have given to us everything that makes life worth living. You have given to us a hope. You have given to us a hope for the future in the Lord Jesus Christ.

That in him, whatever happens in this world, there's a world beyond. That while we climb the hill of Zion, to use the metaphor we've been looking at in these psalms, that there is a destination.

[1 : 05] Sometimes that hill seems shrouded in mist and the destination looks far off. And indeed, hardly does it seem to be there at all. And yet, in your grace and in your goodness, you have given to us everything we need for life and godliness.

We thank you, you are the God who is bigger than our problems. Indeed, bigger than the problems of the whole world. The God who understands us.

The God who sees right into our hearts. We know too that you are bigger than our sins. Whenever our hearts condemn us, God is greater than our hearts.

We are sinners. If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves. And the truth is not in us. We confess our sins. We thank you, you are faithful and just to forgive us.

Father, we have come here to listen to your word. We have come here to hear you speak to us and to help us and to challenge us, to encourage us and to show us the way that we must go.

[2 : 15] We know in the world around us and in our own hearts, there are many, many competing voices. Many voices calling us in other directions. Many paths that seem attractive.

Many ways that seem right to us, but which we know lead to death and to destruction. And so help us to walk in the right way.

You have set before us life and death, blessing and cursing. So help us to choose life. Come to us in all our need. Come to us just where we are and as we are.

We all come from different circumstances. We all come from different backgrounds. Friends, we all come at different stages in our lives. Different stages in our Christian lives.

And some of us perhaps wondering whether we should begin that journey or not. Speak to each of us, our Father. Help us in these moments to put aside distractions.

[3 : 17] And help us to listen to the voice that calls us. Help us in our hearts. Help us in our hearts. Help us to look to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. In whose name we pray.

Amen. Now we've been looking at this group of Psalms, 120 to 134. Part of a group of 15 Psalms which express the pilgrimage from wherever we are to Zion, the city of God.

And we've seen how each of these groups of three Psalms reflect that in miniature. We come to the group of Psalms beginning Psalm 129.

Reading Psalm 131. Psalm 129. Psalm 139. Psalm 139. Greatly have they afflicted me from my youth.

Let Israel now say. Greatly have they afflicted me from my youth. Yet they have not prevailed against me. The plowers plowed upon my back.

[4 : 21] They made long their furrows. The Lord is righteous. He has cut the cords of the wicked. May all who hate Zion be put to shame and turn backwards.

Let them be like the grass on the housetops, which withers before it grows up, with which the reaper does not fill his hand, nor the binder of sheaves his arms. Nor do those who pass by sing, The blessing of the Lord be upon you. We bless you in the name of the Lord.

Then 130. Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord. O Lord, hear my voice. Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my pleas for mercy.

If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness, that you may be feared. I wait for the Lord. My soul waits, and in his word I hope. My soul waits for the Lord, more than watchman for the morning.

More than watchman for the morning. O Israel, hope in the Lord. For with the Lord there is steadfast love, and with him there is plentiful redemption.

[5 : 38] And he will redeem Israel from all his iniquities. Then the third song of Ascent, which is this time by David himself. O Lord, my heart is not lifted up. My eyes are not raised too high.

I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvellous for me. But I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother, like a weaned child is my soul within me.

O Israel, hope in the Lord, from this time forth and forevermore. And as it is the word of the Lord, may he bless it to our hearts.

I've called this today, Pressing On. Some time ago I read in a journal, which I don't normally read, whose name I'm not going to mention, an advertisement which said this, Is your life going nowhere? Then train for the ministry of the Church of Scotland. Now I leave it to you to decide whether that would mean your life was going somewhere. But the psalmist here is in no doubt that he is going somewhere.

[6 : 53] And the somewhere he is going is Zion, city of our God, of which we sang, Glorious Things Are Spoken. He is going to the streams of living water.

He is going to the city of God. And in this group of psalms, once again we run up against problems. We've noticed throughout this group of psalms there is realism.

There are problems, there are difficulties, there are hardships. We've also noticed there is reassurance. There is an end to the journey. There is a destination. And that destination is sure. And once again the same pattern. Notice in 129, Greatly have they afflicted me from my youth. This is beginning in a time of great depression, of great difficulty, of great hardship.

And then again, although the name Zion isn't mentioned at 131, the idea is, verse 3, O Israel, hope in the Lord, from this time forth and forevermore.

[7 : 52] Because it is the Lord who makes Zion Zion. It is the Lord whose city it is. Now in earlier psalms, we notice there's a great many external difficulties.

Hardships, problems, disasters, tragedies, which come from outside. Now that's not absent in this group. But in this group, the difficulties are more internal problems.

And we know this in Christian life. We know this in climbing to Zion. That there are difficulties which come from inside us. Often caused by external things.

And this is part of the realism of these songs for climbers. So let's look at these three psalms. First of all, in Psalm 129, the psalmist is saying, hardship is inevitable.

If you're going to climb to Zion, it is going to be tough. It is going to be hard. Now of course, part of this is because we are human. Because we live in a human world.

[8 : 54] Because we live in a fallen world. We are subject to the same problems as anybody else. Christians have no immunity badge against disease and death. Christians have no guarantee that they will not run into problems.

And we all know that. And we know it very well. But the particular difficulty, the particular hardship here, is not hardship which belongs to humanity in general, but the particular hardships that afflict the Lord's people.

Greatly have they afflicted me from my youth. Let Israel now see. The psalmist is looking at the history of Israel from Israel's youth coming out of Egypt up to the time when he's writing.

The psalmist isn't identified. So we don't know who it is. But the imagery is vivid. The plowers ploughed upon my back. The image there is a whipping with pieces of bone and iron.

That's how the psalmist looks on the history of Israel. But in the midst of this, he discerns a powerful current flowing in the opposite direction. Verse 4.

[9 : 58] The Lord is righteous. He has cut the cords of the wicked. In other words, this hardship that is happening, it seems that the wicked have totally destroyed, totally suppressed the people of God.

But the Lord is in charge. He's cut the ropes. The ropes which are tied to the plough, so to speak, being driven over the pilgrims' backs. Pilgrimage, hard as it is, the psalmist says, the psalmist says, will eventually end in Zion.

Excuse me. But it won't end in Zion for everyone. May all who hate Zion be put to shame and turn backwards.

Those who hate Zion, who oppress the pilgrims, the climbers, on the way to Zion, will ultimately perish. You'll notice they will not reap.

Unlike the sower of Psalm 126, who reaps with joy, the final verdict on the wicked will be different from the final verdict on the righteous.

[11:07] That's the point made at the very beginning of the psalter, the way of the righteous and the way of the wicked. Now, two things about that. First of all, we all begin as the wicked.

It is only grace which makes us righteous. We are not righteous by our own efforts or by our own goodness. And the psalmist is saying, which path are we following?

Are we following the path that leads to life or the path that leads to death? And the other thing is, all opposed to God will ultimately perish.

What are we building our lives on? Or to use the image of our psalms, where are we going? Are we going somewhere? Or are we going nowhere?

That's the first thing. Hardship is inevitable. But the second psalm, the second psalm is a very important balance to this. You see, the problem about the truth of Psalm 129, which is a very glorious and very reassuring truth, is it is so easy to become complacent.

[12:15] We are God's friends. We are the righteous. God will protect us on pilgrimage. God will deal with our enemies. And an unpleasant complacency and an unpleasant sense of pride can creep in.

This psalm is a corrective to that because this psalm is telling it. If the first psalm, Psalm 129, is saying hardship is inevitable, this psalm is saying, Psalm 130, that failure is inescapable.

We rejoice in the message of Psalm 129. And then the question arises, what if I behave in such a way that I become God's enemy? What if in my climbing I cease to trust in him, I cease to trust in his grace and become complacent?

Psalm 130 is one of the so-called penitential psalms, where the psalmist confesses sin and guilt. Now, we've seen already, some of the problems on pilgrimage can be external circumstances, circumstances of danger, circumstances of which cause depression, cause severe trials.

But here the trial is an inward one, and the trial is not depression, it is guilt. This sense of guilt. What if this God, whom I complacently call my friend, what if I behave in such a way?

[13:43] He turns against me. Notice verse 2. Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my pleas for mercy, the language of the penitent, the language of the person who knows that there is no one living who does not sin.

And this sense of sin and guilt leads to crying to the Lord. Notice the repetition of the Lord. If you, O Lord, Lord, who could stand? I wait for the Lord. Hope in the Lord, for of the Lord there is steadfast love.

What do we do when we are crushed with a sense of guilt? What do we do when we feel our sins have separated between us and God?

What we need to do is we need to cry to the Lord. We need to cry for forgiveness. Because the key is in verse 4. With you, there is forgiveness.

Literally with you, there is the forgiveness. That's very important. In other words, there is no real forgiveness anywhere else. If we are crippled with a sense of guilt, nothing else is going to take that away.

[14:58] Nothing else is going to remove that guilt and that sin but crying to the Lord. No one else can remove sin and guilt. You probably sang at school there was no other good enough to pay the price for sin.

He only could unlock the gate of heaven and let us in. That remains true however far we climb up the hill of Zion. So if we want forgiveness, we come to the cross.

We come to the Lord. We cry to him and say, I am a guilty sinner. Like the tax collector, Lord, be merciful to me, the sinner. And once again, it's a definite article there.

The tax collector calls himself the sinner. And that's very important. But what's the result of forgiveness? The result of forgiveness is not I go away and become complacent and proud again.

With you there is the forgiveness that you may be feared. Because it's not just escape from punishment, it is a sense of the presence of the Lord himself.

[16:07] We need to fear God. We take God so lightly, so complacently, and one of the points is sin doesn't trouble us all that much, does it? If the sin happens to be gigantic, technicolor sins committed by other people in far off places, perfectly happy to say that needs forgiveness.

But if the sin is the sin lovingly cherished in my own heart, the secret sins that the psalmist talks about in Psalm 19, when we are forgiven, then we bow before the Lord, we fear him.

And the psalmist longs for a renewed experience of the Lord himself. I wait, I wait, in his word I hope, my soul waits for the Lord more than the watchmen wait for morning.

You can imagine the watchmen at a beleaguered city who want the morning light to dawn so they can see where the enemy is. Or perhaps just some guys who are absolutely tired and weary and wishing it was morning so the next shift could come on.

that is a genuine longing. The fear of the Lord. And why do we fear the Lord? Because with him there is steadfast love.

[17:22] This great covenant word. This word that tells us, as I quoted from 1 John, whenever our hearts condemn us, God is greater than our hearts.

Fear him, you saints, and you will then have nothing else to fear. as the hymn says. The fear of God is the great bulwark against the fear of people.

So, the first psalm, Psalm 129, tells us, as we climb the hill of Zion, as we press onward and upwards, that hardship is going to happen because we are human and also because we are Christian.

It tells us that failure is inescapable. We are never going to reach a point on this climb and say, now I have made it. Only when we stand in the city of Zion itself will we be totally free from sin.

And thirdly, the final psalm, one of the short, beautiful psalms of David, doesn't mention Zion, as I say, but in verse 3, hope in the Lord for this time forth and forevermore.

[18:33] And in the last group of psalms, this is going to be realized in Zion. And this psalm is telling us that humility is essential. For a pilgrim to climb, to climb well, to reach the summit, humility is essential.

Why does the psalmist, why does David hope in the Lord? Not so much a change in circumstances, but a transformation in his heart. Now you see how this psalm fits in with the previous psalm and the previous two psalms.

In Psalm 129, the rejoicing in the protection of God, but the danger of becoming complacent and proud. And the danger in 130 of becoming God's enemy.

But now here, the psalmist realizes, again, that his heart is filled with pride and needs to be changed. Oh Lord, my heart is not lifted up.

What is pride? I used to think when I was younger that pride was something that belonged to a few conceited people. I realize now that pride is the natural condition of the human heart without the grace of God.

[19:52] We love talking about ourselves and our achievements, don't we? We love boring everybody telling how wonderful our families are. I've said the definition of a bore is someone who talks about themselves when you want to talk about yourself.

That is what pride is. And pride has two particular characteristics, doesn't it? If I'm proud, I overvalue myself, my eyes raised high, occupying myself with things too great and too marvellous for me.

I am my own best spin doctor. How tempting it is to bring the conversation round to myself and my achievements real or imagined.

How often do we talk about some conversation in which we've made the cutting remark which we thought about half an hour later and wished we had said.

how often do we exaggerate our importance in some enterprise in which we are engaged. And of course this springs from a deep sense of insecurity, doesn't it?

[21:04] A desire to be noticed. And that of course is characteristic of all of us as human beings. And it's characteristic of all of us as human beings because we belong and live in a fallen world.

And that's where the gospel is so liberating. It takes us out of this frantic desire to be noticed, this frantic desire to be great, and gives us a new identity in Christ, in Christ alone.

Not in my achievement real or imagined, but in Christ. That's the first characteristic of pride, is overvaluing myself. Whereas the second characteristic of pride is looking down on and undervaluing others.

my eyes are not raised too high. Very far from praising others, we do them down, don't we?

It's awfully difficult, of course, when you hear someone being praised and you're not being praised, particularly if they're being praised for something you actually did.

[22 : 15] But that's life. And we need to be rescued from that frantic desire to excel. What's the answer? O Israel, verse 3, O Israel, hope in the Lord.

Now hope is not just some vague feeling. Everything will work out in the end. I don't know, no one has ever said that to me, has encouraged me in the least, because that of course is just a vain, pious hope.

Notice it's not hope as such, it is hope in the Lord. These great biblical words, faith and hope, mean very little unless the object of faith and hope is the Lord himself.

I often hear people saying, I place a great deal of emphasis on my faith. I place no emphasis on my faith at all. My faith is totally fickle, it comes and goes.

The point about faith is not the greatness of our faith, but the greatness of our God, in whom we place that faith. And similar with hope. Hope is not sitting down thinking everything will work out just fine.

[23 : 24] Hope is the confidence that one day God will bring us safely to the city of Zion. And notice how the psalmist is realistic. From this time forth means the rest of my earthly life, and forevermore means beyond it.

And notice the image of the weaned child. The weaned child suggests dependency. I depend on the Lord in the way that a weaned child depends on their mother.

And also suggests growth, doesn't it? These twin ideas, dependency and growth. Blend of childlike trust and active determination, which puts heart back into the pilgrimage, and deepening realisation of who the Lord is and who we are.

So putting these sounds together then, we are going to face hardship. I doubt if there is anyone in this room who is not at this moment facing some kind of hardship.

Some people very severe and very deep hardship. Failure is inevitable. We know, as we sang last week, we go in faith, our own great weakness feeling, and needing more each day, your grace to know.

[24 : 43] But then, we know here that humility is essential. And humility is essential because we depend on grace. Deepening realisation that we are on our way to the city.

This is purely the grace of God. Because humility, remember, is not something we achieve. Humility is not clever people pretending to be stupid.

And beautiful people pretending to be ugly. But that's another type of pride. You can discover this very easily. Somebody says, oh, I made a real mess of that. Just see how humble they are.

See, yes, I agree. You did. You made a dreadful mess. You'll discover how humble they are then. Humility really is taking our eyes from looking inward and looking onward and upward.

The author of Hebrews says, fixing our eyes on Jesus, who himself climbed the hill to Zion and is now at the right hand of God.

[25 : 42] And that will help us to keep pressing on. And that's what these psalms are about. Let's pray. Lord God, we confess often that we get weary in climbing.

The songs, the songs begin to trail away and we feel depressed. We feel we will never make it. And of course, we will never make it on our own efforts.

But we praise you for your wonderful grace. The grace that not only calls us to the pilgrimage, but keeps us on it and will eventually bring us one day to Zion. And we praise your name for this.

Amen.