

1. When He seems to have forgotten us

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[0 : 00] Now let's pray together. We lift our hearts before you and wait upon your word. We honor and adore you, our great and mighty Lord.

Father, we praise you for this glorious creation that you brought into being, for the beauty of earth and sky and sea, for the changing seasons, for the wonderful landscapes, for the myriad forms of life, great and small, many that we know and so much more that we do not know.

We praise you for love, for those who love us and whom we love, those special people you send into our lives. We praise you for friendship. We praise you for those who help us, who help us now and have helped us in the past.

We praise you for all the wonders with which we are surrounded, for the arts, for music, for work, for holidays, for all the blessings that you send into our lives.

We can only wonder at every gift you send, at blessings without number and mercies without end. And yet we know that this same world is fallen and is broken.

[1 : 22] This same world has not only joy and laughter, but sadness and despair. This same world has not only beauty but ugliness. This same world has not only love and harmony, but hatred and violence and evil.

We think once again of the riots that happened last week. We are appalled by them and at the sheer wanton destruction of property and above all for the loss of life.

And we pray for all those who are struggling hard to work out a solution. We think of the terrible famine in the Horn of Africa and pray that those who are rich and increased in goods may indeed help the starving people of our world.

We think of the economic problems, the great financial difficulties, many of them due to our love of money rather than the love of the living God.

And we thank you it was into this world which you made that you came in the person of your Son. You lived among us, you died for us, you rose again and ascended to heaven and opened the kingdom of heaven to all who will believe.

[2 : 39] One day, our Lord Jesus Christ will come again and remove from this creation the curse and the fallenness, sin and suffering and death itself and introduce a new heaven and a new earth in which there is righteousness.

But we are still in this world and so we turn to your word for help, for guidance and for strength. In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Now our reading is on page 478 of the Bibles in the seats there. Psalm 60. Now these headings are part of the Psalms, not the headings in bold type, which are the headings that the ESV editors have put in, which are usually extremely unimaginative.

They tell us what the Psalm already tells us, but don't give us any guidance. But the headings in the light type are actually part of the Psalms and in the Hebrew version, these are verse 1.

So we're going to read that as well. To the choir master, according to Shushan Eduth, a mictim of David for instruction, when he strove with Aram Naharim and with Aram Zobah, and when Joab on his return struck down 12,000 of Edom in the valley of salt.

[4 : 03] O God, you have rejected us, broken our defenses, you have been angry, O restore us. You have made the land to quake, you have torn it open, repair its breaches, for it totters.

You have made your people see hard things, you have given us wine to drink that made us stagger. You have set up a banner for those who fear you, that they may flee to it from the bow, that your beloved ones may be delivered.

Give salvation by your right hand and answer us. God has spoken in his holiness. With exaltation, I will divide up Shechem and portion out the veil of Sukkoth.

Gilead is mine, Manasseh is mine, Ephraim is my helmet, Judah is my scepter, Moab is my wash basin. Upon Edom, I cast my shoe, over Philistia, I shout in triumph.

Who will bring me to the fortified city? Who will lead me to Edom? Have you not rejected us, O God? You do not go forth, O God, with our armies.

[5 : 15] O grant us help against the foe, for vain is the salvation of man. With God, we shall do valiantly, which is he who will tread down our foes.

Amen, that is the word of God, and may he bless it to us. So, the question this psalm is speaking about is, what happens when God seems to have forgotten us?

A question that many of us, I'm sure, have often asked, perhaps many are asking at this very moment. Sir Teresa of Avila, who lived in the 16th century and was a nun and a writer, went through a particularly awful experience of depression and difficulty towards the end of her life.

And towards the end of that time of difficulty, she had a vision of God, in which he said to her, Teresa, this is how I always treat my friends.

And she replied, then, Lord, it's not surprising you have so few. And that's very much in the spirit of many of these psalms, these lament psalms, these psalms of protest, these psalms of question.

[6 : 34] Why? Why? Why, Lord? Because these psalms have big truths about God. One of the reasons we turn to the psalms over and over again is because the life of faith is tough.

And these psalms give us words to express deep emotions, deep feelings, because they run the whole gamut of human experience. And here, it is lament after defeat.

But notice, in the heading that we read for instructing, this is a psalm to teach us. When things are hard, we need to learn, not just to experience, but learn what is happening.

And a fundamental part of teaching and learning is to ask questions. So let's ask some questions of the psalm. Incidentally, that's often a good way to get into a passage of scripture.

Interrogate it. Ask it questions. Find out what it's saying to us. So the first question we want us to ask is, what has gone wrong? This is essentially the first three verses.

[7 : 41] Now, the point about this heading is, this is placing the psalm in a period of David's life, later on in his life, when he was facing great problems from his enemies.

David himself is probably fighting in the Euphrates Valley. These names, Aram Nahariam and Aram Zoba, are way far in the north beside the river Euphrates, while his general Joab is fighting Edom, the old enemy near at home.

And you can read about these battles in 2 Samuel 8. So that's the situation. David in the far north, Joab fighting at home, first winning and then experiencing defeat.

So what has gone wrong? And the first thing to notice is what the real problem is. See, Edom is mentioned in the psalm, but it's not Edom that's the problem.

It's God himself who is the problem, isn't it? You have rejected us, broken our defenses. You have been angry. You made the land to quake and it totters.

[8 : 47] All these vigorous verbs about God's activity. He's rejected. He's caused quakes. And instead of defending the psalmist, he seems to be attacking him.

Attack, and the words that David uses show us how violent and terrifying this experience was. He comes like a flood, broken our defenses. defenses. That suggests a kind of tidal wave, smashing its way through defenses on a low country and on a low coast then.

He is angry. And he's coming like an earthquake or like a hangover after drinking too much. Verse 3, you have made your people see hard things.

You have given wine to drink that makes us stagger. Now, that isn't just about ancient Israel. That's not just about David. That is about a common human experience.

We often feel like this, I'm sure. A severe illness. Oh God, you have rejected us. A bereavement. You've been angry. Repair us.

[9 : 55] We are in turmoil. What's happening? And there's two ways we can look at this. First of all, we can blame God and sometimes that's a natural reaction.

And the psalm, many of the psalms talk about that. Oh Lord, you have rejected me. Jeremiah the prophet says that. Lord, you have deceived me. And many times that's what we feel.

Well, the other thing we can do, and this is what the psalm encourages us to do, is what is God teaching me? And in these verses, we learn something about the consistency of God.

all these words are used elsewhere in other psalms. Trouble is, in other psalms, they tend to be used about God defending us against our enemies.

For example, Psalm 46, though the earth should quake and the mountains fall into the sea, I will not be afraid. Psalm 124, when the enemy rose up like a flood, you defended us, you rescued us.

[10:56] So you see, what the psalmist is talking about here is not something that happens only to God's people.

It's a universal human experience. And the reason for this is we live in a fallen world which is under the curse. And as Christian believers, we have no immunity badge that saves us from these things because we are fallen as well.

We are sinful. We are under the curse. And so, Christians, as well as non-believers, are going to ask these questions.

What has gone wrong? Have I got it wrong? Now, of course, there are many times we sin and we suffer for it. A very obvious example is if we put our hand on a gas oven which is lit.

We're going to burn it. And that's our own foolishness. But that's not the point about this psalm. It's not the point about other great books like the book of Job. This is suffering when we don't appear to deserve it.

[12:01] And it's because we are part of a fallen, broken world where there is no... I mean, those people who suffered violence in the riots last week in London and other cities, they were not more wicked than other people.

They were ordinary people going about their business. So what has gone wrong? And what has gone wrong is we live in a fallen, broken world. But the second question, really running from four to eight, is who is in charge?

Is there anybody in charge? I'm sure you've seen these pictures of riots on your television screens. It did not look as if anybody was in charge. It seemed to make no sense.

And that's the question, of course, that people are asking, leaders and others, are asking themselves, is there anybody in charge? And this is why verse four is a kind of transition to this second.

You have set up a banner for those who fear you. You may flee to it from the bow. In other words, when we suffer these things, there is a refuge we can go to. And next week, the psalm says, lead me to the rock that is higher than I.

[13:12] We can't tackle it in our own resources. And it seems to me the key is verse five, that your beloved ones may be delivered. The love of God who disciplines and cares.

Now, in what sense, then, is God in charge? Now, look at the words, look at the words like delivered and salvation in verse five.

Now, these don't just mean rescued from an immediate situation, although they can mean that.

These are great Old Testament words which ultimately refer to the Exodus story.

God rescuing his people from the slavery in Egypt. These are words of the covenant God who is committed to his people by promises that he cannot and will not break.

And he is speaking to his people now that God has spoken in his holiness or perhaps God has spoken out of Zion, out of Zion, city of our God.

[14:17] Glorious things of your spoken Zion, city of our God. These are no mere words. When God speaks, things happen.

Now, when we speak, often things don't happen because we don't have the power to make them happen. Anyone who's brought up teenagers knows that very well. Simply because we say, do something, that doesn't automatically mean it happens.

But when God speaks, it's not a case of actions being louder than words because God's words already initiate actions. There's no gap between what God says and what God does.

And all these names here, probably wondering what all this is about, he's talking about David's enemies, Israel's enemies, Shechem and Sukkoth are on either side of the river Jordan.

And they're both associated with the old story of Jacob. Jacob rescued by God, Jacob led by God, Jacob delivered and saved by God through all his problems.

[15:25] Gilead and Manasseh once again associated with the time when God led his people into the promised land. Ephraim and Judah, both the north and the south kingdoms as they were to be, which shows this psalm is pointing beyond David's time, because in David's time the kingdom was united and the enemies will perish.

Notice what he's going to do to these. Mob is my wash base. In other words, mob will simply be swept away. And upon Edom I cast my shoe.

That's a metaphor for saying Edom belongs to me. Edom is my territory as well. And over Felicity I shout in triumph.

So you see, what's all this about? This is saying, now these names are not household names to us, although they were household names to those who would first read the psalm. Put into these verses the great problems of the nations of the world.

God is in charge. It may not seem like that. God is in charge of the economic affairs of the world. God is in charge of the military and political affairs of the world.

[16:39] Psalm 2, why do the heathen rage? Why do the nations rage? And the people imagine vain things. I've set my king on my holy hill of Zion. God is saying, those who oppose me, those who ill-treat my people will be judged.

The very first psalm says that the wicked are like chaff, which are blown away. So, that's the first two questions. But then the final question, the third question, what now?

If God is in control, what now? It's one thing to celebrate the victory of God in word or song. It's another thing to believe it in the sense of risking everything on it.

Now, all of us who have experienced crisis know that very well. It's not that we stop believing, it's just we find it terribly hard to believe because that God who seems so near, so close, so much on our side, suddenly seems to disappear and forget us.

So, what are we being taught here about when he seems to have forgotten us? The first thing we're being taught is don't be foolhardy. Who will bring me to the fortified city?

[17:54] Who will lead me to Edom? Now, Edom was on towering cliffs. The little book of Obadiah which talks about the downfall of Edom says, Edom makes its home on the heights, soars like the eagle, and makes their nest among the stars.

We cannot rely on our own resources. Secondly, don't take God for granted. Have you not rejected us, O God?

You don't go for, verse 10, with our armies. Don't go back to the old complacency. One of the things that suffering which C.S.

Lewis says is God's megaphone, is a wake-up call to remind us of who he is. And then, verse 12, with God we shall do violent, is he who will tread down our foes.

Those are what David does not say. He says, I'm going to do valiantly. I'm going to tread down my foes. He's not like the supporters often at our football club. When I go to watch my favourite team play, and if you want to know where that is, if you take the train from Edinburgh to London, it's the first big city you'll come to after the border.

[19:05] You can do it, you can do it, you can do it, yes you can. But the supporters chant. The trouble is they can't most of the time. We're not called to a kind of triumphalism.

It's trusting in God, in partnership with Him. Because then His enemy, our enemies are His enemies. With God we shall do valiant, He will tread down our foes.

Exactly the same as Paul says in the New Testament, 1 Corinthians 15, thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. That's the only way we are going to find answers to these tough questions.

In the Lord Jesus Christ who Himself became human, became one of us without ceasing to be one with God and came down and suffered all these things.

The one who was to cry, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me? That is the ultimate expression of lament. It also points to the answer, doesn't it? Because it is at that cross and the resurrection that we're going to find answers to our questions.

[20:14] What has gone wrong? What has gone wrong is that we live in a fallen and sinful world? Who is in charge? The God of the covenant, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has committed Himself to His people with promises that He cannot and will not break?

And what now? Not just saying these things, but going forward, believing them. This is a good pattern, is it not? Ask questions. The whole scripture encourages us to ask questions right through the psalm.

Why and how long? These are the questions that are asked. It's not sinful to ask questions. It's not wrong to ask questions. Though the Bible is full of people who ask questions.

But then think of the greatness of God. We tend to think of the problem, then bring God into it. God. What the psalms encourage to do is think of God and the problem doesn't look quite so devastating.

And then go forward in faith, thanking the God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

[21 : 24] Let's pray. God. Amen. Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Father, our lives are full of many perplexing questions.

This world is torn with huge and apparently insoluble problems. Help us to look to the God, the God of the past, the God of the present, and the God who will lead us safely into the future.

And we pray this in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.