

2. When we lose our way

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[0 : 00] Now let's pray together. Fear him, you saints, and you will then have nothing else to fear. Father, we live in a fearful and uncertain world.

We live in a world that is unpredictable. We are vulnerable. We are often frightened and lost and lonely. And this happens not just in our own personal lives.

This happens on a global scale. We want to remember the people of Libya. This particular moment, the events unfolding, the chaos and the uncertainty.

We ask that in that country there will emerge a fair and just and stable settlement. That the fall of the regime may not lead to looting and violence, to vengeance, killings and all that sort of thing. But that good and stable leadership will emerge. That the people of that country will move into a period of peace and of prosperity. And this is the same all over the globe, Father.

[1 : 09] We think of the suffering people of Somalia and other countries in the Horn of Africa. We think of the terrible famine and pray that those who are working for its relief, their hand may be strengthened.

We pray you will restrain the warlords and the tyrants who seek to profit from that kind of situation. And in our own land there are many problems, many perplexities.

In our communities there are many strains and stresses. In our homes and families there are many things that make us feel vulnerable and uncertain.

And we thank you that we come to you who is a faithful God. Give to us large thoughts of you. Help us not to confine you within the limits of what we can imagine.

Help us to remember you are the God who can do immeasurably more than all we can ask or imagine. In these moments as we pause from the daily routine to which we will return shortly, we ask that we will gain strength from your word.

[2 : 13] That your spirit will take these words written long ago but with a powerful message for today and every day. Use them to strengthen us. Use them to challenge us.

Use them to show us the way to go. Glorifying God and honoring the Lord Jesus Christ in whose name we pray. Amen. Now in our reading we are on page 478 in the church Bibles and we come to the second of our psalms.

Psalms 61. And we'll read this together. Psalm 61. Psalm 61. To the choir master with stringed instruments of David.

David writes, Hear my cry, O God. Listen to my prayer. From the end of the earth I call to you when my heart is faint. Lead me to the rock that is higher than I.

For you have been my refuge, a strong tower against the enemy. Let me dwell in your tent forever. Let me take refuge under the shelter of your wings.

[3 : 29] For you, O God, have heard my vows. You have given me the heritage of those who fear your name. Prolong the life of the King.

May his years endure to all generations. May he be endured for ever before God. Appoint steadfast love and faithfulness to watch over him.

So will I ever sing praises to your name as I perform my vows day after day. Amen. That is the word of God. May he bless it to us.

I am very fond of music. Music is one of the great pleasures of life.

One of the reasons I enjoy music, and probably real musicians like Ruth will shake her head when I say this. One of the reasons I love music and love listening to it is because of the pictures and images that it evokes.

[4 : 30] For example, you might in one track be in a Swedish pine forest. Then you might be in a summer day in the English countryside. You might have waves beating on a rocky Hebridean coast,

for example.

And music, in other words, evokes and crystallizes many moods, many circumstances, and many places. And so do this book of Psalms, which of course is a collection of hymns, a collection of music, a collection of praise.

Many of the headings specify to whom the psalm is addressed. Here it is to the choir master with stringed instruments. The psalms reach the very heights of praise and the depths of despair with quiet reflection and painful protest.

But this particular cluster of psalms, psalms 60 to 64, on the whole are psalms of lament, psalms of questioning, psalms of exile.

Now this series I've called The God Who Is In Control. But these psalms are often turning that into a question. Is God in control? And this cluster of psalms comes from times of distress in David's life.

[5 : 49] Probably the middle towards the end of his life. And possibly this psalm, Psalm 61, was written during the rebellion of Absalom, his son.

That event that darkened so much of the later years of David's reign and David's life. Because obviously he is away from home here.

He's not in Jerusalem. He's not with his own people. He's away from home. But it's not specified. And so it can speak into every time of distress.

Every time of panic. Every time of feeling an exile. And notice he is praying from the end of the earth. Now the end of the earth, that David liked to ask, means a place about as far away as you can get.

He is far from home. In a later psalm, Psalm 139, he sees that more positively. Where shall I flee from your spirit? If I go to heaven, down to the depths, the uttermost parts of the sea, even there your hand will reach me.

[6 : 58] So what I've called this little psalm is what happens when we lose our way? What happens when we are far from home? And there are two parts to the psalm, verses 1 to 4 and then verses 5 to 8.

First of all then, verses 1 to 4, I'm going to call present safety. David is praying from the ends of the earth. He is not praying in comfortable conditions.

It's one thing to pray, see, in a service together. It's another thing to pray in your own home. David is praying in exile. And his prayer is fervent.

Hear my cry, O God. This is a shout of agony. David is far away from all that is dear and familiar. He is lost.

He has lost his way. And further, he is losing heart. From the end of the earth, I call to you. And my heart is faint. Now faint can mean physical exhaustion, but also emotional exhaustion.

[8 : 04] I think that's what's at the heart of the psalm. David, emotionally, physically exhausted. If it is the background of Absalom's rebellion, feeling betrayed and let down and abandoned.

And in this situation, he prays to God. And while there's no change in the circumstances, verse 2b, lead me to the rock, to verse 4, shifts the camera angle, if you like.

It would be a film. The first scene would have been concentrated on David. David in some desert, some lonely place, some place where he feels cut off from everybody. And then suddenly the camera shifts and God fills the picture.

That's why prayer is so important. He may be far from home, but he is not far from God. And that's the point the psalmist is making, surely.

That's why prayer must be God-centered prayer. If prayer begins with me and my needs, then probably what will happen is, I'll be making my prayers essentially a prescription to God.

[9 : 11] Now God, I've got this problem. Let me suggest one or two things you might do about it. We tend to limit him to our own thinking. And then, of course, when God does none of those suggested lines of action, we panic.

That's not this prayer. This prayer is God-centered. God, because of who you are, because of what you are, because of your faithfulness in the past, I'm calling to you now. And here, David's safety, in spite of the surroundings, is seen in a number of remarkable pictures.

First of all, a basic truth about God. He is the rock. The rock of defense. We can build our lives safely on him, in other words. It's not building on shifting sands or on quagmire.

It is building on the rock. But notice this rock. It isn't just any rock. It is higher than I. In other words, we are saying to God, I've reached the end of my resources.

I can't cope. That's what prayer is saying, isn't it? I can't cope. But you can. Now, you need both parts of it. I can't cope. If we feel we can cope, then we don't go to God, do we?

[10:20] But there's no point in just saying, I can't cope. Because that just leads to helplessness. I can't cope. But you can. The rock is higher than I. We can't build on our gifts, on our talents, on our earthly security.

None of them are strong enough. But notice the second picture. You have been my refuge, a strong tower. This is more personal. This is not just a rock on which you can stand safely.

This is a place where you can go, where you can enter and be safe. A place of rest and a place of shelter. Let me dwell in your tent forever.

Now, a tent seems flimsy, doesn't it? After a rock and a tower. But the tent in Scripture is always the picture of God coming down to live with his people.

The prophet Isaiah talks about God stretching out the heavens like a tent. Idea of companionship. And then, let me take refuge under the shelter of your wings.

[11:26] The idea of the mother bird sheltering her chicks. So you see, there's not only security. There is warmth. There is relationship.

So you see, all these common pictures of the Lord's protection. But we need them all. We need the unyielding strength of the rock, don't we? We need the tower to which we can retreat.

We need the tent, the sense of God's companionship. And also we need the graciousness, the sheltering wings. That's why I call this first part present safety.

Perhaps more accurately, present safety. When there's no safety to be seen in the visible surroundings. But the second part of the psalm, verses 5 to 8, seems for me to take it to a higher level.

And I'm going to call this eternal security. Because this is more than simply an assurance of present help. As the mood changes from pressure to praise.

[12:29] It is true that God helps in the present. I'm sure there is no one here who cannot look back at incidents in their lives, perhaps many, when God has intervened and wonderfully rescued us from whatever that circumstance may have been.

And that's true. And we thank God for that, don't we? But we also know that when those times are over, we cannot safely say they'll never come again. Because in our life, in this world, we are always going to face the problems.

We're always going to face the difficulties. We're always going to be conscious of our vulnerability. So what David is doing here is saying something very important.

This is the heart of the Gospel. Those welcome interventions of the Lord. We sang about it. Remember his deliverance. I will boast to all that are distressed.

Take comfort from God's help to me. And find in him their rest. Now that's true. But that's not the whole story, is it? These interventions are only trailers.

[13:33] Only anticipations of something greater. Because what this psalm goes on to talk about is not simply interventions to help in this world, in this life.

But in the eternal world. Which is what the Gospel is about. This is seen in three pictures. First of all, verse 5. For you, O Lord God, have heard my vows.

You have given me the heritage of those who fear your name. Now the heritage of those who fear your name is above and beyond help in the present crisis.

And Peter talks about this in his first letter. He talks about the Christian having an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled and unfading.

Kept in heaven for you. That's what the heritage is. God, in his great goodness, gives us many, many blessings in this life. Blessings of people.

[14:34] Blessings of circumstances. Blessings of all kinds he surrounds us with. But, ultimately, the hope is, as Peter says, kept in heaven for you.

And Paul, in 1 Corinthians, chapter 2 says, All things are yours. And that's not in this present world. That's in Christ. Many things are not ours in this present world, but in the world to come.

In the eternal future, where there will be no distance and no disaster. And eternal security is greater than present safety. Now don't misunderstand me.

I'm not saying present safety doesn't matter. I've discovered over the years, when you say something is more important than something else, people hear you as saying the other thing isn't important at all.

So don't misunderstand me. Present health is good. Present health. After all, think of so many of our prayers. When we pray individually or when we meet in fellowships to pray, so often we pray for recovery from illness.

[15 : 39] So often we pray for people getting a job. These kind of things, these matter. But they are ultimately less important than eternal security.

Because all those things, good and bad, will pass. But this heritage of those that fear your name will not pass. And in many of the other psalms, David and the other psalms speak about this.

So, this picture of the heritage of God's people. Then verse 6. Prolong the life of the king. May his years endure for all generations. How is this heritage going to happen?

Now, verse 6 actually tells us. Verse 6. This could be David the king praying that God will spare him and give him long life.

But more likely it's talking about his successors, his descendants. God's covenant with David that his descendants would reign. Now, of course, they made a mess of it.

[16 : 41] They didn't get it right. But that wasn't the end of the story. But the way it was going to happen was that God was through God's promises to King David and to his successors.

And to that nation to which Jesus would come and for which the gospel would spread through the whole world. So, it's very interesting actually how the New Testament talks about that being fulfilled. David the king will reign over the nations. That's what the Old Testament says. That's what the Old Testament predicts and promises. How is that going to happen? A son of David has never sat on the throne of David for two and a half millennia.

It doesn't look like the promise is going to be fulfilled. But Paul tells us in Romans 15, as the nations come to give their allegiance to the Davidic king, David's greater son, the Lord Jesus Christ, David's kingdom grows.

That's how it's going to happen. And the third picture, verse 7, may he be enthroned forever before God. There will come a true king who will guarantee this.

[17 : 43] One who will be enthroned forever before God. And one in whom the promises of God will be fulfilled. Steadfast love. That's what God promises.

Many words for love in the Bible. This word translated steadfast love especially refers to God's covenant love for his people. Whom he has called by his name.

Whom he has committed himself to by promises that he cannot and will not break. And his faithfulness. God is faithful, says Paul in 1 Corinthians.

Now notice that's an absolute statement. It's not God is sometimes faithful. Not even on the whole God is faithful. But God is faithful. Full stop. That's what David is saying here.

In spite of our lostness. In spite of our loneliness. In spite of our wandering. In spite of our sins. Once again, that's the same idea as the rock. The rock because it's higher than I.

[18 : 42] The faithfulness of God. And in Christ. The king who will reign forever. Through all generations. That prayer of David is fulfilled.

Both for present safety. And eternal security. And verse 8. Ends with praise. So will I ever sing praises to your name.

As I perform my vows day after day. You see. You see. When we think of God like this. It's not just an abstract idea. But we go away thinking.

Oh God is faithful. That's an abstract idea. Kind of thing. Theologians talk about. This is an absolute truth. And so this psalm. Has led us.

From. The ends of the earth. It has led us home. And home. Is where. God's king. Is enthroned forever. In other words.

[19 : 39] This psalm. Has led us. As the whole Bible. Leads us. To the Lord Jesus Christ. The king of kings. And lord of lords. And when we are away from home. When we are away from all that is dear.

And familiar. This is our assurance. You God. Have heard my vows. You have given me the heritage. Of those who fear your name.

And that is a gospel. Worth believing. That is a gospel. Worth proclaiming. Amen. Let's pray. Faithful God.

How we need the rock. And the tower of your faithfulness. Our own faith. Is so fickle. It blows hot and cold. Help us to take strength. From these words.

Help us to rejoice. In the God. Who is with us. All our days. And yet. Beyond our days. As well. And then. Into the eternal kingdom. The heritage.

[20 : 38] Which he has prepared. For all those. Who fear his name. And so. Like David. We want to sing praises. To your name. And give you thanks. Amen.