

5. When we are perplexed

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[0 : 00] Now let's pray together. Have you not known, have you not heard, the Lord is the everlasting God, the creator of the ends of the earth.

He does not faint or grow weary. His understanding is unsearchable. Even youth shall faint and be weary, and young men shall fall exhausted.

But they who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength. They shall mount up with wings like eagles. They shall run and not be weary.

They shall walk and not faint. Our God, how we praise you for who you are and what you have done.

You are great and we are small. You are eternal and we are mortal. You are holy and we are sinful.

[1 : 01] And so it is that we bring our fragile lives, our hopes and our fears to build upon the great rock of your unchangingness.

And to ask you for help as we continue our journey here on earth. We thank you for these moments when we can draw aside from the good things and the bad things, from the duties and the business to which we will return, and to listen for some moments to what you have to say to us.

We particularly want to remember those whose hearts are heavy at this moment. We pray for our dear friend Liz Aitchison and for the service that will follow shortly after this.

And we thank you for the life of Joey, for his bright faith, and for the way that he trusted in you, and for the way that showed in the life that he lived. And we pray that the service will be honoured and that those who are there, particularly Liz, will be strengthened.

We know we live in an uncertain and difficult world. A world where there is turmoil. A world where there is fear. A world where there is distress and doubt and unhappiness.

[2 : 16] And yet we also live in a beautiful world. A world of love. A world of colour. A world of light. A world of hope.

And only in you and in your unchanging goodness and in your faithfulness can we find any meaning in the perplexity of our lives.

And so as we turn again to your word, Father, we pray that you will speak to us, not just as a word you once spoke long ago, but as a word you are speaking now.

And as we listen, as we look at your word together, your Holy Spirit, who gave us that word, will now come into our hearts and come into our lives and will help us to understand and to apply it.

And we give you our thanks and ask all this in the name which is above every name. The name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. Now in the Bibles that you have there, if you turn to page 480, please.

[3 : 26] Over the last few weeks, we've been looking at a number of the Psalms, particularly Psalm 60 and today coming to 64. I've called this little series, God is in the God who is in control.

In many ways, that sometimes seemed like a question mark. Is there a God who is in control?

Because most of these Psalms come from a time in David's life when he was in great turmoil.

Probably the time when his son Absalom had dethroned him and he was in the desert and in perplexity. So we come now to Psalm 64. To the choir master, a psalm of David.

Hear my voice, O God, in my complaint. Preserve my life from dread of the enemy. Hide me from the secret plots of the wicked, from the throngs of evildoers who whet their tongues like swords, who aim bitter words like arrows, shooting from ambush at the blameless, shooting at him suddenly and without fear.

They hold fast to their evil purpose. They talk of laying snares secretly, thinking, who can see them? They search out injustice, saying, we have accomplished a diligent search for the inward mind and heart of a man are deep.

[4 : 53] But, God shoots his arrow at them. They are wounded suddenly. They are brought to ruin with their own tongues turned against them. All who see them will wag their heads.

Then, all mankind fears. They tell what God has brought about and ponder what he has done. Let the righteous one rejoice in the Lord and take refuge in him.

Let all the upright in heart exalt. Amen. This is the word of the Lord. May he bless it to our hearts and minds. I wonder if you've come across the poem simply called If by Rudyard Kipling.

That contains two lines which say this, if you can meet with triumph and disaster and treat these two imposters just the same.

You can meet with triumph and disaster and treat these two imposters just the same. Triumph and disaster in a sense are what this group of sounds have been about.

[6 : 06] Now, they're not imposters in the sense that they don't happen. There are periods of great triumph of great happiness in our lives. There are periods of great distress, periods of great sorrow.

But the point is this, neither of them are ultimately what life is about. Neither of them last forever.

That's what David, I think, has been saying to us in these sounds.

David, in his triumph, David, in his disaster, has found there is something that is deeper than either triumph or disaster. That's why it's important to read these sounds together.

And Psalms 63, which we looked at last week, and Psalms 64 are mirror images. Psalms 63, you might, if you like, call white on black.

The blackness is there. The enemies are there. But the main emphasis in Psalms 63 has been on the power and glory of God, David's soul satisfied and his mouth praising.

[7 : 10] Whereas here, in Psalms 64, it's black on white. The goodness is there, the love is there, and above all, God is there. Nevertheless, it's particularly the enemies who are emphasized.

And these have been the two great realities in these Psalms, the enemies who attack David and the God who protects David. That's the case same in our lives as well.

We are not David. Nevertheless, the life of David, the life of faith that David lives, mirrors the life we live in this world. If we get the true perspective, we'll avoid false triumphalism on the one hand.

The kind of silly talk you get sometimes, if you trust in the Lord, you won't have any problems. We know that's not true. Or at least if we don't know, we'll soon enough discover it when life throws things at us.

On the other hand, a kind of unbelieving pessimism. The idea is never going to improve. It's never going to be any better. That's the first thing I want to say.

[8 : 15] These psalms have to be read together. And secondly, this psalm, and indeed all the psalms, have emphasized the importance of clear thinking. Verse 9, ponder what he has done.

Look at the works of God. Meditate on the great truths of Scripture. Particularly the great truth that runs through the whole of Israel's faith. My help is in the name of the Lord who made heaven and earth.

Not a godlet who is part of heaven and earth and who is confined in part of heaven and earth, but the Lord who made heaven and earth. So let's look at this psalm briefly with that in mind.

There are really two parts to this psalm. First of all, savage attacks in verses 1 to 6. Attack after attack comes upon David.

Secret plots wetting their tongues, shooting from ambush and so on. Like Claudius in Hamlet, when troubles come, they come not single spies, but in battalions.

[9 : 22] The troubles are raining down on David. They're coming at him from all sides. And first of all, the source of these troubles, verse 1, preserve my life from dread of the enemy.

Now David had many enemies. The particular enemy here is almost certainly his son Absalom, his much loved but overindulged son who had risen against him.

But behind the enemy, behind all the enemies in the psalm is the enemy, the devil himself. Your enemy, the devil, whom Peter talks about, be sober, be vigilant, for your enemy, the devil, goes about like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.

And it is the devil who is behind all these attacks. The kind of nameless fears that grip us. As we know there's different kinds of fears, but it is the fear, the dread that's talked about here.

The fear that you cannot give a name to. And that's why the Bible so often says do not be afraid. Why does the Lord say that so often?

[10 : 33] It's because our lives are dominated by fear, aren't they often? We're afraid of the future. We're afraid of other people. What will people think of us? We have phobias.

I'm not going to tell what mine is because I know some people here will deliberately torment me with it, so I'm not going to tell you. But we all have phobias.

And then we have, of course, the nameless fears, the dread, that grips us. And it's more terrifying because we cannot give a name to it. Now, when the Lord says don't be afraid, he doesn't mean we, by a kind of psychological gymnastics, get ourselves into a state where we have no fear at all. What the Lord is saying is don't be afraid, not because there's nothing to fear, but because I'll protect you. And that makes all the difference, doesn't it? If you have to say to it's, oh, I've no fear at all.

Perfect love casts out fear, we know that, but so also does stupidity and drink and other things as well can cast out fear. It's not that. It's basically saying, because the Lord is on my side, I can still do this, I can still go ahead.

[11:47] We're told in Hebrews 11, Moses was not afraid of the anger of Pharaoh. Why was he not afraid of the anger of Pharaoh? Because he saw him who is invisible.

Take it to the Lord in prayer, as the hymn says. So the source of the attacks, and if you like the multitude, the deviousness of these attacks, verse 3, quet their tongues like swords, bitter, bitter words, secret plots, the word ambush, and the word secretly.

That's what Paul talks about in Ephesians 6, when he talks about the devices of the devil, which need the whole armour of God. Notice how many of these things are about speaking.

They quet, verse 3, who quet their tongues like swords, who aim bitter words like arrows, malicious gossip, remarks that do people down, the whole atmosphere of tittle tattle, that so often surrounds us, the relentless enemy.

When I was a boy, there used to be a silly song, sticks and stones can break your bones, but words can never hurt you. That's not true. Words can hurt terribly, and that hurt can last for years.

[13:12] How often a thoughtless remark, a cruel remark, can come back to you after years, you're in turmoil, you're in agony.

Words are terrifying things when they're used in the wrong way. What we say reveals what we are. That's why Proverbs says, the gossip separates close friends.

So there are savage attacks, and that's what life is like often, isn't it? Life often throws all these kind of things at us. Life often treats us like, often treats if we were a punch bag, doesn't it?

And there are many, many experiences like that, and possibly at this moment there are people in this very room who are feeling like that, feeling that the enemies are surrounding them on every side, that the enemy particularly is attacking.

And that's the first part of the psalm, it's realistic, isn't it? This is not, this is not, as some of the sillier hymns tell us, he taught me how to watch and pray and live rejoicing every day.

[14:25] Do you live rejoicing every day? I certainly don't, maybe because I'm an old misery gut, but that's neither here nor there. That is not the true picture of the Christian life.

Christian life is often hard and bitter agony. But, if that were all, that would certainly be gloomy. But this is not, this is gospel.

The psalms are gospel. They're about grace. And that leads us on to the second part, verses 7 to 10, swift judgment. The savage attacks are met by swift judgment.

The great words, which in a sense almost sum up the gospel, but God. You see, if it was only verses 1 to 6, life would be misery indeed. The future would be black.

There would be little point in going on. So, what do we place against it? We place God against it, but God. The enemies are real.

[15:26] The enemies are powerful, but God. In contrast to all the devious scheming, God cuts through it all. And notice, first of all, how God turns the tables.

God shoots his arrow at them. They are wounded suddenly. They are brought to ruin with their own tongues turned against them. You'll notice, of course, that picking up.

Verse 3. What do the enemies do? They whet their tongues like swords who aim bitter words like arrows. Now, Spurgeon says in his great commentary on this psalm, a greater archer than they are shall take aim at their own heart.

God turns the tables. It's an important thing about the judgment of God. Judgment of God is never arbitrary. When God judges, it is because people have rejected him.

People have judged themselves. For example, in the flood story, God says, the earth is corrupt, therefore I will destroy it. Now, these are parts of the same word.

[16:32] It's as if God is saying the earth has self-destructed. So I'm going to destroy it. And then in Romans 8, the terrible repeated phrase, God gave them over.

God gave them over. God gave them over. God looks at the wicked. And remember who the wicked are. The wicked are those who defy God.

The wicked are those who turn their back on God. The wicked are those who want to block God out of his universe and out of life. And their punishment is that God says, right, I'm going to take you at your word.

C.S. Lewis said, there are two types of people. Those who say to God, your will be done. And those to whom God says terribly, your will be done.

Those who say to God, your will be done, are those who with all their faults and failures, given their lives to God. Those others have turned away from God. So God turns the tables, and God brings about a fundamental change.

[17:45] Look at verse 9 again. Then all mankind fears. They tell what God has brought about and ponder what he has done. As so often in the Psalms, this takes it away from David's specific experience to apply it to the whole of humanity.

Then all mankind fears. And the three verbs in this verse are in many ways a summary of the life of faith. First of all, we fear God.

A true sense of who God is and a desire to obey him. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. As the hymn says, fear him, you saints, and you will then have nothing else to fear.

Because the fear of the Lord, one of the many ways in which it's the beginning of wisdom, is it cuts all other fears down to size. Fear God, and then tell what God has brought about, proclaim, tell others, tell others of what God has done.

Tell others that God has rescued me, and therefore he can rescue you. Tell others that it's not a case of being overwhelmed by fears, it's a case of fearing one who is greater.

[19:01] And then ponder, mentioned already, think deeply, meditate on the wonderful acts of God. My help is in the name of the Lord who made heaven and earth.

If he made heaven and earth, there is nothing in heaven and earth that is outside his control.

Nothing in heaven and earth that can separate, as Paul said, nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Turns the tables, causes a fundamental change, and that's going to lead in verse 10 to praise. Let the righteous one rejoice in the Lord and take refuge in him.

Let all the upright in heart exult. In many ways, this sums up the message of these psalms, psalms 60 to 64. God isn't saying, look at the enemies and rejoice.

God is saying, first of all, you've got to fear me. You've got to place me in the picture. You've got to tell others what he is doing, and then that will lead to praise.

[20:12] Now, in previous terms, taking refuge is one of the particular images. Remember the rock on which we build our lives, the tower in which we take refuge, then the much more homely and personal image under his wings, the image of the mother bird and her chickens.

You see, God isn't just simply a rock, an impersonal rock on which we build our lives. He is a loving God. So, as we face the enemies, as we fear the enemies, and of course, they are real, then we need to look to God, realize who he is, get God and the enemies in their true perspective.

That's why we must never begin with our own situation. If I begin with my own situation, look at all the problems I have, look at all the difficulties I have, that's even before I begin looking inside and thinking of how unsatisfactory I am, then I'm going to despair.

I'm never going to get out of it. I'm going with God and then the enemies outside and inside begin to dwindle and take a true perspective.

What's the end of it all? The end of it all is praise. And really there are two types of praising, aren't there? There is praise while the battle is going on. Remember what we sang a moment or two ago.

[21:38] Come those whose joy is morning sung and those weeping through the night. Come those who tell of battles won and those struggling in the fight.

There is singing in the battle, but there is also singing when the battle is over. O all the world his people sing. Shore to shore we hear them call.

The truth that cries through every age our God is all in all. That is a God worth believing in. That is a God worth fearing.

That is a God worth trusting. Amen. Let's pray. Come all and tune your hearts to sing the morning star of grace.

In the darkness of this world our Father we praise you for your word that you've given us a light to shine in that dark place until the morning star arises. So help us now in the struggles and battles of this life.

[22 : 39] Help us to look forward to the day when every heart and every tongue will rejoice and when Christ will be all in all. We ask this in his name.

Amen.