

Good News for Bad Days

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[0 : 00] Now, if we could have our Bibles open, please, at page 488, we'll have a word of prayer and ask the Lord's help as we come to this passage.

God our Father, we believe you have things to say to us, and we believe we need to hear them. So we pray, Lord, that as I speak with human words, which are imperfect and infallible, that I may faithfully unfold the written word, and so lead us to the living word, Christ Jesus, in whose name we pray. Amen.

Amen. Good news for bad days. That's our subject this morning.

I don't know how many people here are experiencing the bad days, but we certainly all need the good news, and that's so important. I'm very fond of music. One of the things I love about music is the power to open up different worlds to us.

We're into the chilly depths of a Swedish pine forest. You hear the lap of the waves on the Hebridean island. You are transported to the landscape of rural England, to Elgar's childrens, or to a market day in the Urals, or much else.

[1 : 28] And that is one of the great blessings of the Psalter, this book of Psalms. Somebody once said, if the whole of the Old Testament, apart from the Psalter, had disappeared, we'd probably be able to work out a very reasonable idea of what the whole of the book was.

And there's a great deal of truth in that. These Psalms are songs for all seasons. A few weeks ago, Dick Lucas brought to us the stark reality of Psalm 14, with its robust analysis of the human condition.

And he also brought to us the rejoicing and praising of Psalm 8. Edward has started to lead us through the rich biblical landscape of Psalm 119.

And at the prayer meeting on Wednesday evening, Tom McGill brought to us that great Psalm of Providence, Psalm 103. Here we are in a very, very different Psalm, are we not?

We're in a situation of great distress. Verse 2, in the day of my trouble, I seek the Lord. Now, what is that trouble? It's not specified, so we can all identify with it.

[2 : 40] An unhappy teenager who is finding the pressures of life growing increasingly burdensome. Perhaps a student who has come to university excited at leaving home and starting a new life.

But perhaps now finding it's not all plain sailing. It's not the way that she had hoped. Perhaps pressurized middle-aged people, children growing fast, the pressures of an increasingly frantic and busy lifestyle.

The unemployed can't find a job. The elderly wondering if it was all worth it. All of these situations are spoken to in this Psalm.

Even if you're not in a situation like that this morning. Even if you are rejoicing, thank God for that. Praise Him for the goodness that He's brought into your life. But remember, there will come a time when you will need the teaching of this Psalm.

There will come a time when you will be crying aloud to God and thinking He's not hearing you.

There will come a time when you will say the word, why, how long, these kind of words that ring through the whole of the Psalter.

[3 : 49] That's the great value, isn't it, of systematic expository preaching. Over a period of time, as the Bible is expounded, it talks into every situation.

It talks into every heart. So looking more closely at the Psalm, Clearly, it falls into two main parts, verses 1 to 9 and verses 10 to 20.

Verses 1 to 9 is a lament, and we'll come back to what that means. Verses 10 to 20 is a hymn of praise. And obviously, one of the things we have to look at is what's the connection between these

two.

How do they fit together? And each section, you will notice, is further subdivided by the word, Selah. Nobody has any idea what that means. Lots of people pretend they do, but they don't. It's probably when the Psalm, what the Psalm would be said to music, it's probably a pause in the music while people reflect and prepare for the next part. And you'll notice also the word, remember, dominates both parts.

[4 : 59] When I remember God, verse 3, verse 6, I said, let me remember. And then on into the second part, I will remember, verse 11, the deeds of the Lord.

Yes, I will remember your wonders of old. And so, clearly, what we have in both parts is different ways of looking at the same situation, rather than simply a change of mood.

This is good news for bad days. So let's begin with the bad days, which is verses 1 to 9, which I'm going to call the crippling problem. To use the word deliberately, this is a crippling problem.

The Psalmist is not down in the dumps. There is no point going to this Psalmist and saying, take a grip on yourself, shake yourself out of it, cheer up, it may never happen.

You know, all these kind of silly things that people say when people are really going through it, when people are really under pressure. This is an intense and crippling experience and the Psalmist is alone and he's afraid.

[6 : 08] First of all, notice the intensity of this experience. Verse 1, I cry aloud to God. Aloud to God. It's repeated. Now, very often in Britain and in our Christianity, we tend to behave as Stoics rather than Christians.

The stiff upper lip and so on, pretending that everything is just fine. That was not the way of the Bible, nor was it the way of our Lord himself. The letter to the Hebrews says that he prayed to God with loud crying and tears.

This is a very intense experience. And the Psalmist is terribly afraid. Many of you will know the Narnia stories. Perhaps not so many if you know this other book, A Grief Observed, which C.S. Lewis wrote when his wife died.

Let me read you a little bit of it. This is how he begins. No one ever told me that grief was felt so like fear. I am not afraid, but the sensation is like being afraid.

The same fluttering in the stomach, the same restlessness, the same yawning, the same sleeplessness. I keep on swallowing. This is a powerful description, rather like what this Psalmist is feeling.

[7 : 26] Notice it's both outward distress, voice and hands, he mentions. Some kind of out. But it's also inward distress. In the, when I remember, my soul refuses to be comforted.

And remember in the Psalms, the soul is me, me myself. Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name. That means all of me is to praise God.

All of the Psalmist is refusing to be comforted. And great preacher and commentator on the Psalm, C.H. Spurgeon, speaks of the deep glens and lonely caves of soul depressions.

And Spurgeon himself, we know, suffered from very intense depression throughout most of his life. He is sleepless, he is speechless, and there's a sense of it going on and on and on.

But the second problem is even worse. It's not so much the crippling problem, it's the sense of God's silence. Where is God in all this?

[8 : 29] Why, when he cries to God, does he seem to get no answer? I want to read from Lewis again, because I think this is a very, very powerful passage. Lewis says, Meanwhile, where is God?

When you are happy, so happy, that you have no sense of needing him, so happy, that you are tempted to feel his claims upon you as an interruption, if you remember yourself and turn to him with gratitude and praise, you will be, or so it feels, be welcomed with open arms.

But go to him when your need is desperate, when all other hope is vain, and what do you find? A door slammed in your face, and a sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside.

After that, silence. You may as well turn away. The longer you wait, the more emphatic the silence will become. There are no lights in the windows.

It might be an empty house. Was there ever anyone there? Have you ever felt like that? I most certainly have. This is an experience that many of God's children pass through, perhaps passing through at this very moment.

[9 : 47] And there is real value in bringing those fears to the Lord. The old hymn says, take it to the Lord in prayer. And that's what the psalmist is doing. First of all, it doesn't seem to help.

When he remembers, verse 3, when I remember God, in other psalms, when the psalmist remembers God, he rejoices, he praises, he is happy. When I remember God, I moan. And then he says, when I meditate, and last Sunday evening, Edward commented very helpfully on that word, meditate, or meditating on the scriptures. But this doesn't, as in Psalm 119, lead to renewed confidence. Rather, it leads to his spirit fainting. We have past blessings, and we have present distress. But notice, the psalmist keeps on struggling. He's not going to give up. I'm not going to let you go, he says to God. Just as Jacob had, in Genesis 32, wrestling with a mysterious stranger, said, I'll not let you go until you bless me.

[10:52] This is what the psalmist is doing with the Lord. Verses 5 to 7, I consider, I said, let me remember, will the Lord spurn forever? He's deliberately confronting the problem of God's silence.

A terrifying, bleak experience as he looks out on a universe from which all sense of God's gracious love seems to have vanished. Now, there's a question that arises here.

It's a question I've been wrestling with all week, and before, when I, when I was, when I felt led to this psalm for our, for our morning study.

How is this different from whinging and complaining? What my granny would have called gurning. What makes this so different?

Isn't all the psalmist is doing, moaning, complaining, making a fuss? For example, if you, if you could just turn ahead a few pages to page, if I can find the page, I'll tell you.

[11:57] Why is it sheets never turn when you want them? To page 499 and to Psalm 95. Psalm 95, the end of verse 7, the Lord says, Today if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as at Meribah, as on the day at Massa in the wilderness where your fathers put me to the test and put me to the proof that he had seen me work.

Isn't this exactly what the psalmist is doing? Murmuring? Putting the Lord to the test although he knows about his work? What on earth have those people been saying that makes it so different from this psalmist?

They must have been complaining. But they're not, are they? Look back at verse 95. Oh come, let us sing to the Lord. Let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation.

These are not people who seem to be complaining. Those are people who are singing their hearts out. Just imagine if you were singing your hearts out and suddenly a voice breaks in and says, I wish you would just be quiet and listen to me.

That's what happens in this psalm here. What's the difference? Why, what was the difference between this psalmist and the people whom this other psalmist in Psalm 95 warns not to harden their hearts, not to complain?

[13:19] I want to suggest one or two things that make this utterly different. Complaining always focuses on the past and focuses on it with ingratitude.

That's the important thing. What did these people in Psalm 95 want to do? They wanted to go back to Egypt. Egypt not seen as a place where babies were drowned, where slavery was terrible and where oppression was the everyday experience.

They saw Egypt as a place where they had nice meals. Oh, we ate garlic and leeks in Egypt and so on. We're fed up with this manna that God's giving us now. So they want to go back to the past because they are ungrateful.

But the other thing is they don't fundamentally believe that the Lord can deliver the goods. They don't believe he'll actually bring them to the promised land. In other words, they do not believe in the name of the Lord who made heaven and earth.

They don't believe in the name of the Lord who brought his people through the Red Sea. And these seem to me some of the differences between the lament psalms and the murmuring psalms.

[14:26] The lament psalm wrestles with God and says, God, I know you were wonderful in the past. You were gracious to me. You loved me. I remember the time when I sang all night.

You know, I remember my song in the night, verse 6, and my meditations in the night. I was so happy because you were so wonderful and gracious to me. Whereas murmuring looks at the past with envy and ingratitude, looks at the present and looks at the future and says, Lord, I don't believe you.

I don't believe that you can deliver the goods. What makes the difference in this psalm? What makes the transition between verses 1 to 9 and verses 10 to 20?

How does, maybe not exactly as Wesley saying, the dungeon flaming with light, but what causes the light to break in? And look at verse 8. The psalmist, as he thinks on God, mentions a word which transforms everything.

His steadfast love. His great Hebrew word, Heseth. The God who is committed to his people by promises that he cannot and will not break.

[15:46] Psalm with which we began this morning, the great 136th Psalm, prays to the Lord for he is good for his Heseth. His covenant love endures forever.

And as the psalmist speaks these words, a light shines on his desolation. To mention that is to answer it, has his Heseth ceased?

Of course it hasn't ceased because the very essence of it is that it doesn't cease. The psalmist realizes it's time to move on, to move on from the bad days to the good news, to move from the crippling problem to the second part of the psalm, which is the God who is greater than the problem.

First part focuses on the problem, the second part focuses on God, but notice that God dominates the first part as well. He refuses to let him go.

It's what Job does through his agony about it in the book. That's what Jeremiah does. That's what Jacob does when he refuses to let God leave him.

[16:55] So he turns to God. Notice the verbs, I will appeal, verse 10, I will remember, verse 12, I will ponder and meditate. Typically, this psalm appeals to the power of God.

The psalmist elsewhere says, my hope is in the name of the Lord who made heaven and earth.

This psalmist says, effectively, my hope is in the name of the Lord who redeemed his people from Egypt.

That's what he's saying. I will remember the deeds of the Lord. And verse 10, the years of the right hand of the Most High. The hand of God, sometimes the arm of God, sometimes even the finger of God, particularly refers in the Old Testament to the power of God.

And it particularly refers to these two great truths that run through Scripture. God is the creator. God is the savior, the redeemer, who brought his people from Egypt.

So notice what he does now. How does he relate to God in this second part of the psalm? First of all, he addresses God directly. Verse 13. The point about the whinging and murmuring psalms is that the people talk about God.

[18:04] The point about lament is that you talk to God. Your way, O God, is holy. What God is great like our God? And the psalmist is echoing a much earlier song, the song of Moses that he sang in Exodus 15.

What God is as great as our God? But here's another problem, isn't there? This psalmist is not Moses. How can he expect the same kind of treatment?

And that's one thing we've got to be very careful when we're interpreting the Bible, that we don't just take it and apply it in the raw. But look at verse 15. You with your arm redeemed your people, the children of Jacob and Joseph.

This is now extended to all God's people. It's not just Moses who experienced God's Heseth, God's steadfast love. All his people do and those names are chosen very deliberately.

Who was Jacob? Jacob, the fickle and frightened lad who fled away and found that his uncle Laban was a bigger cheat than he himself was and had to come back and face his brother Esau.

[19:10] Jacob who said, all these things are against me. Never were things moving more in Jacob's favor, actually. And he said, all these things are against me.

Joseph, who was Joseph? 17 year old lad clapped in prison for 13 years. Imagine that. The best years of your life passing you by. The years when you'd hope to marry, to get a job, to do all kinds of things to explore.

Where is Joseph? He's in prison. And the worst of those years would be when he, in prison, he met Pharaoh's chief butler who was restored to favor him.

Joseph says, remember me when you get back into Pharaoh's favor. And the text tells us that the butler did not remember Joseph. He forgot him.

Moses has a reputation, didn't remember, he forgot. And for two more years, Joseph hopelessly languishing in prison with nothing happening. What does Joseph say at a later stage?

[20:12] You meant it for evil. But God meant it for good. There is the doctrine of providence. Not just the, you know, not just a theoretical idea.

God meant it for good. The children of Jacob and Joseph. We like Jacob, fickle, frightened, of course we are. We like Joseph, depressed and disturbed when things go in the wrong direction. God meant it for good. So he addresses God directly, echoing the song of Moses, echoing the history of his people. And then he, he, he is this wonderful picture in verse 16 and following of the power of God.

Remember I said a moment ago the psalmist was terribly afraid. Now here's fear again. But this time it's not the psalmist who was afraid. It's the waters who are afraid.

The waters saw you, O God. When the waters saw you they were afraid. Indeed the deep trembled. And remember the waters in scripture are not just the literal physical sea that covers much of the planet.

[21 : 20] They are the evil hostile powers opposed to God. And that gives such depth and such power to those words in Mark 4 doesn't it?

Who then is this that even the winds and the waves obey him? The winds and the waves obey him now as they did then. The entire world is affected.

Earth and heaven fight on the side of God. And the point about this surely Exodus is not just something that God did once. It was.

It was a mighty act, a unique act. But yet it illustrates what God always does. What God is like. Because it points forward to the greater Exodus. Remember when Moses and Elijah met Jesus on the Transfiguration Mount.

And what did they speak about? They spoke of his Exodus that he would carry out at Jerusalem.

The Exodus of the past points forward to that greater Exodus and in heaven in Revelation 15 the redeemed in heaven sing the song of Moses and of the Lamb.

[22 : 23] They sing of the great God of creation and Exodus. What's made possible this change in perspective? The steadfast love of the Lord.

The Heseth that will never cease. And there's one other idea. Verse 20 You led your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron. This is not just brute force.

This is not the overcoming of one power by a greater power. This is the shepherd who proved his steadfast love by dying for the sheep.

I am the good shepherd says Jesus. The good shepherd gives his life for the sheep. And as he led his people like a flock in those days of the past by the hand of Moses and Aaron.

So we cannot fail either to reach the destination as he leads us like a shepherd. Now that's what the psalm is saying.

[23 : 21] Good news for bad days. And just one or two points to sum up what I've been saying. The psalm doesn't take away the mystery. Look at verse 19.

your way was through the sea. Your path through the great waters. Yet your footprints were unseen. Till we reach the father's house there will always be questions that we won't know the answer to.

God's footprints will be unseen. So there is still mystery. As the old hymn says there is no other way but to trust the promises and obey the commands because his footprints are unseen.

Second thing is this. This psalm has not been edited out of the Bible. It's not been decided these words are too disturbing that we can't talk to God like that.

This and books like Job and passages in Jeremiah and elsewhere have been kept so that when we go through similar troubles we know that we are suffering along with God's people.

[24 : 24] God is not angry with us because we are suffering. God is leading us through the sea and through the great waters. And finally the psalm ends abruptly.

The psalmist doesn't tell us that the situation is resolved, does he? We don't return to the situation. Why doesn't he do that? It seems to me he doesn't do that because those situations are going to come again.

Perhaps in the psalmist's life, certainly to other people. We need stronger assurance than simply oh God sorted things out. We need the assurance that only comes from confidence in God himself.

The good shepherd who died for the sheep. The letter to the Hebrews tells us he is also the great shepherd who was raised from the dead and by that resurrection guarantees that all God's people will make it.

And he is as 1 Peter says the chief shepherd who will appear one day in glory and we will look back then and see that God meant it for good and that is good news for bad days.

[25 : 36] Let's pray. God our Father, like the psalmist, there is much that we do not understand. There are many mysteries, there are many problems. Help us to trust in your steadfast love, to feel your strong and gentle hands guiding us through the mysteries of this world, to trust in the good shepherd who is also the great shepherd and the chief shepherd who will bring all his people to glory and none will be missing. And for this we thank you. In Jesus' name. Amen.