

He is ready to forgive

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[0 : 0 0] Well, let me welcome you this afternoon to this lunchtime Bible talk. It's good to see you. If you're here for the first time, particular welcome. Now, last week started a short series on Psalm 18, which I'm calling the Lord of the God of our salvation. And this week we're going to be looking at verses 20 to 30 of that psalm, which you can find on page 455. But I'm going to read, I'm going to start reading at verse 6, verses 6 to verse 30 of this psalm. David writes, In my distress I called upon the Lord. To my God I cried for help. From his temple he heard my voice, and my cry to him reached his ears. Then the earth reeled and rocked, the foundations also, the mountains, trembled and quaked because he was angry. Smoke went up from his nostrils and devouring fire from his mouth. Glowing coals flamed forth from him. He bowed the heavens and came down. Thick darkness was under his feet. He rode on a cherub and flew. He came swiftly on the wings of the wind. He made darkness his covering, his canopy around him. Thick clouds dark with water. Out of the brightness before him, hailstones and coals of fire broke through his clouds. The Lord also thundered in the heavens, and the Most High uttered his voice, hailstones and coals of fire. And he sent out his arrows and scattered them. He flashed forth lightnings and routed them. Then the channels of the sea were seen, and the foundations of the world were laid bare. At your rebuke, O Lord, at the blast of the breath of your nostrils. He sent from on high. He took me. He drew me out of many waters. He rescued me from my strong enemy and from those who hated me, for they were too mighty for me. They confronted me in the day of my calamity, but the Lord was my support. He brought me out into a broad place. He rescued me because he delighted in me. The Lord dealt with me according to my righteousness. According to the cleanness of my hands, he rewarded me, for I have kept the ways of the Lord and have not wickedly departed from my God. For all his roles are before me, and his statutes I did not put away from me. I was blameless before him, and I kept myself from my guilt. So the Lord has rewarded me according to my righteousness, according to the cleanness of my hands and his sight.

With the merciful, you show yourself merciful. With the blameless man, you show yourself blameless. With the purified, you show yourself pure. And with the crooked, you make yourself seem tortuous.

For you save a humble people, but the haughty eyes you bring down. For it is you who light my lamp. The Lord my God lightens my darkness. For by you I can run against a troop, and by my God I can leap over a wall. This God, his way is perfect. The word of the Lord proves true. He is a shield for all those who take refuge in him. And this is the word of the Lord.

Now let's have a moment of prayer. Lord God, we thank you for this beautiful day. We thank you that this fulfills your ancient promise that as long as the earth remains, summer and winter, sowing and harvest, day and night will not cease. We rejoice in your goodness. We luxuriate in your love.

Yet we know we are sinful. We know we have fallen away. Holy living eludes us. And we sometimes are ridden with guilt, other times full of complacency. We thank you, Lord, for those words you have written for us in the Bible. Those words that help us to understand something of you and something of ourselves. And we pray that in these moments, as we look together, that those words written long ago, that they may become the living word for today. And that indeed we may find with David that the word of the Lord proves true. And you're a shield for all those who take refuge. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

[4 : 44] Amen. This psalm is an absolutely splendid poem. When we are reading the first part of it about the smoke, about the thunder, about the lightning, it really stimulates the imagination. But almost immediately, another thought comes into our minds. If this God is as great as that, if he is as wonderful as that, if he is as powerful as that, how on earth am I going ever to stand in his presence? I'm so sinful.

I'm so weak. I am so fickle. How can I ever stand in his presence? Now, last week, the first part of the psalm, we looked at God who deserves to be praised. And today, I want us to look at these verses 20 to 30 under the title, God who is ready to forgive. Because, as I say, there will be people here who will be absolutely hag-ridden with guilt. Things that we have done in the past, which God has forgiven long ago, but which we can't forgive ourselves. Now, guilt can be a very deceptive emotion.

Sometimes we can feel guilty about things we need not feel guilty about. Things that I say, which God has forgiven. And things, and other things, of course, very often, since we are fallen people, we don't feel guilty about and ought to. I think when we are looking at this in relation to God, I think the thing I want to talk about today particularly is the grace of God, the grace which covers all our sin. I was reading recently about a guy who worked in Edinburgh in the 19th century.

He was a professor of Hebrew at the college in Edinburgh. So learned it was. His student used to call him Rabbi Duncan and say that he would pray to God in Hebrew. Whether that's true or not, we don't know. In any case, we know that the Lord would understand Hebrew, even if his students didn't.

And one day he was preaching in a church and there was a communion service. And at the beginning of the communion service, he noticed a lady who was weeping uncontrollably. And as the elder took to her the bread and the wine, she pushed and said, no, no, no, I can't take it. I'm too bad. And Rabbi Duncan, who was no shrinking violets, stepped down from the pulpit, grabbed the bread from the elder and said, take it, woman. It's for sinners. And that seemed to me that is just the essence of the grace of God. Take it. It's for sinners. And this message here is a message for sinners. I'm afraid if you're not a sinner, it's not a message for you. But this is a message for sinners. But there's a problem here when we read these words. Verse 20, the Lord dealt with me according to my righteousness, according to the cleanness of my hands. He rewarded me.

[8 : 02] How on earth could David or any other sinner see that? Is that just the gospel of good works, Lord? I've done all these things, Lord. I'm this kind of person. Why do you not accept me?

Now, there's two things. First of all, ultimately, these words are not about David. They're about David's greater son, the Lord Jesus Christ, whom David imperfectly pointed. These words could only be spoken by him, the one who kept all the demands of the law, and the one who alone can make us righteous. That's the first thing. And the second thing here, David is speaking about God's grace.

Now, as I said last week, how can David speak this way? After all, David did not exactly have a clean sheet. And this psalm also appears in 2 Samuel after the story of David's adultery and murder, the story of Uriah and Bathsheba. How on earth could he speak this way after that? The reason he could speak this way after that is that he knew that God's grace was sufficient to cover every sin if we repent of it. Because after David had committed that sin, he instantly repented in words that appear in Psalm 51 later on. So this psalm is about the God of our salvation. If you're struggling with sin and guilt, this is a psalm for you, God who is ready to forgive. Just two main points I want to make.

First of all, verses 20 to 24, this is the confidence that springs from a relationship. It sounds a bit like the old nursery rhyme, little Jack Horner sat in a corner, said, what a good boy am I. That's what it sounds like to begin with. That doesn't make sense, does it?

That's why I read the first part of the first part of the psalm. The man who in verses 1 to 19 praised God who rescued him from his enemies, who lifted him up when he was in a total despair, who destroyed those who wanted to kill him. How on earth is a man like that?

[10 : 24] Now going to say, oh, by the way, the really important thing is my good character. The important thing to David is not his good character. It's the fact that the Lord is his God.

And so the righteousness springs from the reality that God has saved him, that he's in a saving relationship with God. See, ultimately, the gospel is not about rules. It's about relationships.

Ultimately, it's not. Ultimately, the gospel and religion are light years apart. Religion says, I do good, therefore God accepts me. The gospel says, God accepts me, therefore I do good. You can see they're millions of light years away. David is not saying, look, look at me, God, I've been so wonderful. And you're really rather blessed, Lord, to have somebody like me. No, he's saying something quite different. He is saying that he is in a relationship with the Lord who has taken fickle David as he can take fickle people like us and made him into a new person. That's what the gospel is.

He has said, I've kept the ways of the Lord. Verse 20, all his rules were for me, all his statutes I did not put away from me. This is carrying on the Exodus theme in the early part of the Psalm. He's saying when God rescued him, it was like God rescuing Moses at the Exodus. And when God rescued Moses and the Israelites, then he gave them a way to live embodied in the Ten Commandments. That way to live was given to people who were already redeemed, who were already God's people. Not saying this is how you ought to live, but saying, I have saved you. This is the way to live as children of the King. And one of the commentators said David had sometimes weakly departed from his duty, but he had never wickedly departed from his God. Later on in the book of Kings, the author is to say that David was wholly devoted.

David's heart was wholly devoted to the Lord his God. And it's the heart that matters. Heart in the Bible is a bigger thing than in English. We often contrast heart and mind. We often contrast feelings and emotions and thought. And of course, that contrast is valid. But in the Bible, the heart includes thinking, planning, as well as emotions and feelings. The heart is who we are. Indeed, sometimes when you come across the word heart in the Bible, it could only be translated personality. It's the basic you. It's the basic me. And the idea here is God has saved me, and therefore I want to live for him. Just as when you love someone, you want to make their life as pleasant as possible. You want to live to please them, not because there are rules and regulations. So that's the first point. In these early verses, the confidence that springs from a relationship. Then in the next part, verses 25 to 30, the covenant which seals that relationship. Notice the word, the Lord, the covenant God, who is committed to his people by promises that he cannot break. Now, what David is saying here is he's not congratulating himself. Rather, this is what David believes about God. David believes these things, but God is merciful, God is pure, God saves the humble, God brings light, God's way is perfect, and the word of the Lord proves true. That's what David believes about God. And now he's, and now as it were he's offering it back to God, as he prays, do you find it difficult to pray? I certainly do. Prayer is often hard work, and it often, see, it's strange. When I decide to have a time of prayer, I always remember the email I ought to have sent, the phone call I ought to have made, saying, I'll just read the next chapter of my book,

[14 : 48] I'll feel fresher, and then I'll come to prayer. Naturally enough, of course, that these are all reasons for evading prayer. I think when it's difficult to pray, as it often is, one of the best ways is to take the language of Scripture and turn these into prayers. Particularly the book of Psalms, not just the book of Psalms. But one thing that continually disappoints me is the sheer poverty of my language when I pray. And the way to avoid that, of course, is to take the language of others, the great prayers of the Bible. And not just the great prayers of the Bible, other prayers which others have written. After all, some people say it's quite wrong to have set prayers, to say the prayers that others have written.

Well, if it's wrong to do that, then it's also wrong to sing words that others have written. An awful thing if every time we wanted to praise God, we had to write a lyric. I suspect that would not be a very attractive prospect to many of us. The point is, David believes these truths about God, and David turns them into a prayer. Because that is what prayer is about, isn't it? It's speaking with God. It's not simply giving them a shopping list. Lord, remember my great aunt's bunions or something like that.

Nothing wrong with praying to God about these things, but so often it's a shopping list rather than a conversation with the Lord. Look at these qualities. God is merciful. Now, if we are ridden with guilt, if we are feeling totally crushed, that's the thing we need to hear. It's not we're reminding God that he's merciful. God knows he's merciful. It's that God loves us to dwell on who he is. With the blameless, you show yourself blameless. Blameless here doesn't mean perfect. Blameless means not deliberately sinning.

Remember, we can't help sinning, and we'll not be able to help sinning as long as we're in this world. There's a difference between sinning and the practice of sinning, and the Bible makes a clear distinction between these. We sin through ignorance sometimes, because we don't really know.

We sin through weakness, because we want to do right, but we don't do it. But of course, it's also easy to sin deliberately. I know this is wrong, but I'm jolly well going to do it.

[17 : 21] And we need to know the character of the God to whom we are praying. See, the important thing is the God to whom we are praying. We pray to the wrong God, to a God of our own imagination, a God, as many people did in biblical times. They prayed to idols, gods who couldn't hear, gods who couldn't see, gods who couldn't speak. It's quite good, actually, praying to idols. It feels our natural, natural temptations, doesn't it? If I pray to a God who can't speak, then he's never going to rebuke me, is he? He's never going to tell me I'm on the wrong path. If I speak to a God who can't see, he's never going to see into my heart or see what I'm doing. If I speak to a God who can't hear, I can say anything I want. But on the other hand, what's the point of that? What's the point of speaking to a God who can't see when I'm lost and need direction? What's the point of praying to a

God who can't speak when I'm totally perplexed? And above all, what's the point of praying to a God who can't hear when I'm most desperate to hear him? So David is saying, Lord, I've discovered, both through the reading of Scripture and in David's case, this was largely the works of Moses, what we call the Pentateuch, Genesis to Deuteronomy. And I've discovered in my own experience that you are all these things. You are, and verse 27, you save a humble people. Humble people are those who recognize that they are sinful, who recognize they can't make it on their own. Remember, prayer is essentially saying, I can't cope. I can't make it on my own. And we shouldn't get ourselves tied in knots about this. The letter of James says, if somebody prays in a double-minded way, God will not hear them. And we really get into terrible, terrible trouble about that, don't we? We think, unless I have absolutely complete faith, God will not hear me. That's not what James means. James means, unless I am totally committed to bringing this to God and asking God to do something about it, then he won't hear me. How often we pray for things we don't really want. Somebody said, be careful what you pray for, because God may answer you. And I think that's a very important thing to remember. Not servile, not cringing, but people who need God's grace. And the effect of all this, in verse 28, is to bring light into our lives, not just to bring it into our lives, but to keep it burning in the darkness. And in verse 29, he's talking about probably many of his experiences as he made his way to the throne. We saw last week, this is a psalm coming from his time of persecution, when King Saul was determined to keep him from the throne. For by you, I can run against a troop, and by my God, I can leap over a wall. Probably here thinking about the time of persecution with Saul. Probably also thinking of the time he faced Goliath and the Valley of Elah, and so on. This God, his way is perfect. This God, if we pray to this God, and if we believe in this

God, he will lead us in the right way. Sometimes it will be confusing. Sometimes we won't know where we're going, but he knows where. The word of the Lord proves true. In other places, David says the word of the Lord is true. What he's talking about here is the word of the Lord experienced in his own life. He is a shield for all those who take refuge in him. Now, these statements are going beyond David.

These are general statements, as I say, about God. This is the kind of God to whom we pray, and this is the kind of blessing he will give if we pray to him. So, as we think about our own experiences of living, as we think about our own sinfulness, as we think about our own perplexities, as we leave here and go back to our normal life, our normal business, normal circumstances, these verses are enormously encouraging because they tell us, first of all, that we don't go on our own. We take the Lord into all these circumstances with us, and we trust in his grace.

Secondly, they tell us that this is a question of relationships with him. Relationship involves speaking. Now, of course, people know each other well. Very often, they can understand each other even when words are not spoken. Nevertheless, it would be a non-relationship that did not involve speaking. And thirdly, since this is the covenant Lord, he is committed to his people by promises that he cannot and will not break. That is why don't place so much emphasis on our faith as on God's faithfulness. Often people say to me, I place a great deal of emphasis on my faith. Well, I'm afraid I don't. My faith is so fickle and so feeble. What I do increasingly trust in is God's faithfulness.

[22 : 55] God is faithful and he will do what he promised. Amen. Let's pray. Father, as the sounds of the table tennis players resound in our ears, we thank you that in every circumstance of life, from the high moments to the low moments and all the everyday moments in between, that you are God and that your grace, which begun a good work in us, will continue until the day of Jesus Christ. Amen.