

3. When God Seems Far Away

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Preacher: Bob Fyall

[0 : 00] The earth is the Lord's and everything that fills it, the world and those who live in it. Father, on this beautiful day, we are reminded of your ancient promise that as long as the earth remains, summer and winter, springtime and harvest will never cease.

We rejoice to see spring coming. We rejoice to see the flowers and the blossoms and the buds on the trees once again. And we are reminded of your great love towards us, this wonderful creation that you have made and which one day you will redeem and which even now in this kind of weather and in these kind of days we can catch glimpses.

Truly, the earth is full of your creatures. You have made everything and you have made it well. And yet we know that is not the whole picture.

We know that in this world there is famine. In this world there is sorrow and heartbreak. In this world there is darkness and war and plague.

And above all, in this world there is death. And we know very well that often on days like this, our moods and our experience is very much out of tune with the sunshine.

[1 : 21] Sometimes as the sun shines around us, we feel we are plunged into deep darkness. Sometimes as others rejoice, we feel that you have left us and abandoned us.

Sometimes, indeed, we have the experience of this Sam. We wonder, has his mercy and compassion in his anger been destroyed?

And so we rejoice at the gospel. The gospel that does not pretend that these things do not exist and does not pretend that they don't exist together.

It points us forward to a day when all these alien things, when sin and suffering and crying and death itself will be no more in the new heaven and in the new earth.

And so we come to you, our Father. We do not know what is in each other's hearts or even what is in each other's lives. But we know that in your word and in your riches in glory in Christ Jesus, there is sufficient to meet all those needs.

[2 : 23] And so as we open your word now, we pray that you will open that word to our hearts and minds. And open our hearts and minds to that word in Jesus' name.

Amen. Now, if you turn in the Bibles, please, to page 488. And we're going to read that psalm we've just sung together.

We've been looking at the so-called Lament Psalms, two psalms of David. This one, as you see, is by an unknown author addressed to the choir master, the chief musician, according to Jejuthon, which is probably some kind of musical instrument or some kind of liturgical term.

This is a psalm of Asaph, one of the temple singers. Psalm 77, verse 1. I cry aloud to God, aloud to God, and he will hear me.

In the day of my trouble, I seek the Lord. In the night, my hand is stretched out without wearying. My soul refuses to be comforted. When I remember God, I moan.

[3 : 31] When I meditate, my spirit faints. You hold my eyelids open. I am so troubled that I cannot speak. I consider the days of old.

Years long ago, I said, let me remember my song in the night. Let me meditate in my heart. Then my spirit made a diligent search.

Will the Lord spurn forever and never again be favorable? Has his steadfast love forever ceased? Are his promises at an end for all time?

Has God forgotten to be gracious? Has he in anger shut up his compassion? Then I said I will appeal to this, to the years of the right hand of the Most High.

I will remember the deeds of the Lord. Yes, I will remember your words of old. I will ponder all your work and meditate on your mighty deeds.

[4 : 30] Your way, O God, is holy. What God is great like our God? You are the God who works wonders. You have made known your might among the peoples.

You with your arm redeemed your people, the children of Jacob and Joseph. When the waters saw you, O God, when the waters saw you, they were afraid.

Indeed, the deep trembled. The clouds poured out water. The skies gave forth thunder. Your arrows flashed on every side. The crash of your thunder was in the whirlwind.

Your lightnings lighted up the world. The earth trembled and shook. Your way was through the sea. Your path through the great waters.

Yet your footprints were unseen. You led your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron. That is the word of the Lord. May he bless it indeed to us.

[5 : 28] One of the very great pleasures of living is music. I am no musician, but I do enjoy listening to music.

One of the things I love is the power that music has to open up different worlds. Transport, for example, to the chilly depths of a Swedish pine forest. The beat of waves on a Hebridean island.

And landscapes of rural England. Market day in the Urals. By the way, I am not going to ask you what each of these pieces are, but some of you will know. And much else. Now the Psalms do that for us in a more powerful way.

Because the Psalms are a great symphony that play the whole gamut of human experience from heights to depths. The Psalms essentially are songs for all seasons.

Now in the last two weeks, we've played on a particular mood, so to speak. The mood of depression. The mood of distress. And we're keeping there this week.

[6 : 31] Although, as we will see, this actually plays two very different moods. One of depression and despair. And the other of praise. This is a situation of great distress.

A situation when God seems far away. Now it's not specified, so all of us can identify. An unhappy teenager could read this Psalm and identify with it.

A student whom the gloss of student life has worn off. Pressurized middle age with pressures of business and work. The children growing fast. The unemployed.

The elderly looking back on their lives and wondering if it was all worth it. This Psalm speaks into all these and many more situations. If you're not in that kind of situation now, then sooner or later you will be.

And this Psalm is strength. This Psalm is help. Now there are two parts that we're going to look at in turn. There is lament in verses 1 to 9.

[7 : 34] And then there is a hymn of praise in verses 10 to 20. And the other thing is the word remember. That's the word that dominates both parts.

And since remember dominates the second part as well as the first part, it's not that the circumstances and the mood have changed. It's rather that the psalmist has looked at the circumstances in a different way.

So let's begin then with the lament. What I would call the crippling problem. Verses 1 to 9. The psalmist here is not down in the dumps.

He's not feeling blue. This is something far more intense and crippling. The poet is alone and he's afraid. And first thing to notice is the intensity of his prayer.

I cry aloud. This very, very, very strong word. Now, the letter to the Hebrews tells us the Lord Jesus Christ himself went through this experience.

[8 : 37] Jesus himself with loud crying and tears. The psalmist is afraid. And the psalmist is distressed.

There's outward distress. Hand is stretched out without wearying. And there's inward distress. My soul. Remember in the Bible, the soul is not just some entity inside you.

The soul is you. He's in total distress here. His inward distress and his outward distress as he lies tossing and turning and unable to sleep.

Now, you know, all of us know those experiences when you can't sleep. And if your mind starts on gloomy thoughts, then it doesn't just gradually go down.

It helter-skelters down and down in these small, dark hours. The great preacher C.H. Spurgeon, who wrote a very fine commentary on the psalms called The Treasury of David, and himself suffered from great depression, describes this experience as the deep glens and lonely caves of soul depression.

[9 : 49] This psalm is about. And it's a sense of a long ordeal. The sense that it's going on and on and on. And nothing is happening. Nothing is changing.

So it's a very intense experience. But the most problematic thing is not that. The most problematic thing is God's silence. He tries to speak to God.

He tries to listen to God. And there's no answer. He knocks at the door. And instead of finding that he who knocks, the door is open.

The door is barred. The door is firmly shut. Now, of course, there is real value in bringing this to the Lord. But at first, it doesn't seem to help.

The psalmist brings these to the Lord. But he doesn't seem to help at first. Notice he says, and he will hear me. He doesn't seem to be hearing. That this, in the day of my trouble, when I remember God, I moan.

[10 : 49] Many of the psalmist says, when I remember God, I rejoice. When I remember God, my heart is filled with gladness. But he is moaning. And he's meditating. He's not meditating here on the goodness of God.

He is meditating on the disappointments and the silence of God. The past blessings make the present situation an even bleaker one.

And notice in verses, notice how he is. He's not saying life treated me hard. He's being honest with the Lord. You hold verse 4, my eyelids open.

I am so troubled that I cannot speak. The old hymn says, take it to the Lord in prayer. We need to bring not just our thanksgiving, but our distress, our despair.

Take that to the Lord as well. He can take it. He's not going to be offended. Deliberately confronting the problem of God's silence.

[11 : 54] Now, in what way, a question arises, in what way is this different from the complaining, whinging psalms, like Psalm 95, where the psalmist condemns those who simply complain?

What my granny would have called gurning. You know, this kind of whinging, sort of moaning and complaining, which the British are awfully good at, aren't they? Even on a day like this, at least two people have said to me, we'll pay for this.

It's a terribly British thing, isn't it? Anytime anything good happens, we can't really accept it, because it may not last. Anyway, what's the difference? And I think there are two major differences.

First of all, the moaning and complaining psalms really are saying, we never trusted God in the first place. We don't believe he did anything all that wonderful in the past.

We don't believe he's going to help us in the present. And we don't think there's very much he can do in the future. That's the first difference. The second difference is, complaining is usually to other people.

[13 : 08] The psalmist is bringing his big questions to God. He's saying, Lord, I don't understand this. I really don't see how what I'm experiencing fits in with what I know about you.

And there is a transition in this psalm. A startling transition. When he looks out on the universe, from which every trace of God seems to have vanished, he listens for the loving, familiar voice, and he can't hear it.

The trouble seems to be getting worse rather than better. But as he considers God, there is a transition in verse 8. Has his steadfast love forever ceased?

This is the great covenant word, the word *heseth*. The word of the covenant by which God commits himself to his people by promises that he cannot and will not break.

To ask this question is to raise the stakes. See what he's saying? Lord, I believe in you. Help my unbelief. This is not deliberate unbelief, turning away from God.

[14 : 19] This is faith struggling to keep on believing. And what makes the difference is this great covenant word, *heseth*. Notice, indeed, he uses the covenant word.

Will the Lord spurn forever? *Heseth, heseth*. Has his steadfast love forever ceased? Has he forgotten to be gracious? And to raise these questions is to begin to answer them.

That brings us into the second part of the psalm. Psalmist has honestly, openly, fearlessly laid it out before the Lord. Lord, I don't understand this.

Rather than the way that it's developed in far greater detail in the book of Job. This is what's happening here. And he comes now in the second part to the God who is greater than the problems.

Notice I'm not saying he comes to the solution of the problem. He comes to the God who is greater than the problems. That's the way the psalm works. And notice the active verbs. I will appeal.

[15 : 19] I will remember. I will ponder. I will meditate, he says. In other words, he's going to actively seek God. And notice the phrase in verse 10.

The years of the right hand of the Most High. The right hand of God is used of the power of God in creation. The power of God in the Exodus.

And he's going to come to the Exodus. The power of God creating the worlds. The power of God rescuing his people. The power of God which made heaven and earth.

The power in verse 15. With your arm you redeemed your people. But you see, arm is a more personal word than power. Power is an abstract word. Arm suggests the humanity, the personal nature.

This is a God who one day is going to take flesh after all. He is a God whose arm is going to be embodied in human flesh. That's the point here.

[16 : 20] So he addresses God directly. And he reminds himself of who God is. Verse 13. Your way, O God, is holy. And this is echoing the song that the Israelites sang.

That Moses taught them to sing. And the Exodus as they crossed the Red Sea. Your way, O God, is holy. What God is great like our God.

But you have made your works known among the peoples. Verse 14. This is extended to everyone. Notice this verse. You with your arm redeemed your people.

The children of Jacob. Jacob the fickle. Jacob the cheat. People of Jacob. And also the people of Joseph. Reminding us of the story of Joseph.

Thirteen years in prison. Thirteen years of wondering if the Lord had forgotten him. If the Lord had ceased to remember him. So you see what's happening here.

[17 : 16] He is drawing strength from the deep wells of scripture. He's reminding himself of the great promises. As the old hymn says, standing on the promises which cannot fail.

And the howling storms of doubt and fear assail. And in these circumstances, there's no point in telling ourselves to rejoice. Or telling others to rejoice. We have to lay hold on the promises.

Who God is. And so on. And now he. Now you remember at the beginning. The psalmist is terribly afraid. He's lonely. He is afraid.

And fear comes into the psalm again. In verse 16. This time it's not the psalmist who is afraid. This time it's the waters. The powers opposed to God.

Who are afraid. Verse 16. When the waters saw you, O God. When the waters saw you, they were afraid. Indeed, the deep trembled. Now the waters. Of course, drawing from the Exodus story.

[18 : 13] But also in the Old Testament. The symbol of the anti-God powers. The powers that rage against God. And against his purposes. The entire world is affected when God moves.

Notice the clouds. The skies. Your arrows flash. The lightning. Crash of your thunder. Your lightnings lit up the world. Your way was through the sea. So, the whole of creation.

It's as if God is mobilizing the whole of creation. To help his people. Because the great Exodus story. Is not just something that God did once.

But it's something that showed what God is like. And it points to the greater Exodus. In the New Testament. The Exodus that's spoken about in Luke. When Moses and Elijah speak with Jesus about the Exodus.

He's going to carry out Jerusalem. You see, what's happened is the great covenant word. Heseth. Steadfast love. Has unlocked the door. The dungeon may not exactly be flaming with light.

[19 : 19] But at least light has shone into the darkness. And the psalmist has gained a new perspective on the situation. And notice verses 19 and 20.

He is a God. Is the shepherd. The shepherd who one day is to die for the sheep. The shepherd who is to give his life for the sheep. Shepherd who fights the wolves and all the enemies of the sheep.

Confirmed when he's raised from the dead. And notice how God leads by means of under shepherds. It's the last verse. By the hand of Moses and Aaron. Moses and Aaron were fallible people like us.

But God's people are going to reach the destination. Because it's the shepherd who is ultimately leading. Now you see as we finish. The psalmist hasn't suddenly found a solution to the problem.

What he's found. What he's doing is he's leaving us in these strong and gentle hands. The hands of the shepherd. As we finish.

[20 : 28] Notice there is still mystery. Your way was through the sea. And your footprints were unseen. In this world until we reach the father's house.

There are some questions which will remain unanswered. These words have not been edited out of the Bible. They've been left to help us. And we're struggling.

It ends abruptly. And why is it not? Why is the situation not resolved? Why does the psalmist not live happily ever after? Because such situations will come again.

But and our security is in the shepherd. We need that stronger assurance. The good shepherd who died for the sheep. The great shepherd who was raised from the dead.

And the chief shepherd who will appear in glory. These are good words. And strong truths. For times when God seems far away.

[21 : 27] Amen. Let's pray. Lord God. We are often like the psalmist. We become utterly distressed. We thank you.

That this is not a sign. That you have abandoned us. Or have forgotten us. And we thank you for the great truths. Of the shepherd. The shepherd who gave himself for the sheep.

And the shepherd who will lose none of his sheep. And we praise you for this. In his name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.