

God our Stronghold

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[0 : 00] Please turn with me in the Word of God to Psalm 9, which we've just sung a part of. Psalm 9. We'll be reading the whole psalm.

Let us hear God's own Word. I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart. I will recount all of your wonderful deeds. I will be glad and exult in you.

I will sing praise to your name, O Most High. When my enemies turn back, they stumble and perish before your presence. For you have maintained my just cause.

You have sat on the throne giving righteous judgment. You have rebuked the nations. You have made the wicked perish. You have blotted out their name forever and ever.

The enemy came to an end in everlasting ruins. Their cities you rooted out. The very memory of them has perished. But the Lord sits enthroned forever.

[1 : 00] He has established his throne for justice. And he judges the world with righteousness. He judges the peoples with uprightness. The Lord is a stronghold for the oppressed.

A stronghold in times of trouble. And those who know your name put their trust in you. For you, O Lord, have not forsaken those who seek you.

Sing praises to the Lord who sits enthroned in Zion. Tell among the peoples his deeds. For he who avenges blood is mindful of them. He does not forget the cry of the afflicted.

Be gracious to me, O Lord. See my affliction from those who hate me. O you who lift me up from the gates of death, that I may recount all your praises, that in the gates of the daughter of Zion I may rejoice in your salvation.

The nations have sunk in the pit that they made. In the net that they hid, their own foot has been caught. The Lord has made himself known. He has executed judgment.

[2 : 03] The wicked are snared in the work of their own hands. The wicked shall return to Sheol, all the nations that forget God. For the needy shall not always be forgotten, and the hope of the poor shall not perish forever.

Arise, O Lord. Let not man prevail. Let the nations be judged before you. Put them in fear, O Lord. Let the nations know that they are but men.

So far the reading of God's word. In this psalm of David, Psalm 9, David expresses great confidence in the Lord.

And it's a psalm that has spoken to God's people in a variety of ways through the centuries. This was the favorite psalm of John Knox, the great Scottish reformer who led the Reformation here in Scotland and established reformed churches here.

And this was a psalm that he turned to over and over again for comfort and for encouragement, for strength in distress. Because what this psalm speaks about is indeed great confidence in the Lord, but it is not a confidence that David found or that Knox found or that we will ever find easy or automatic.

[3 : 24] David had faced real distress and real difficulty in his life. And it was only out of that difficulty and out of that distress that he came to have confidence in the Lord.

We can see in verse 13, David prays, see my affliction from those who hate me. David had known affliction. David had known struggle.

He had known struggle from the hand of those who were his enemies. And he had known the struggle of faith that questions, why is God so apparently absent in my struggles?

Psalm 10, which is closely tied in a variety of ways to Psalm 9, begins with that struggle of faith, wondering where God is. Psalm 10, verse 1, why, O Lord, do you stand afar off?

Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble? This manner of speaking to hide one's face reminds us of the covenant language of Israel.

[4 : 31] As God told Moses that when the people break their vows, they will be exiled from the land and his face will be hidden from them. But the question here is, why are God's enemies prospering? Why do his servants seem to suffer? David is asking, why, O Lord, am I struggling this way? Why am I afflicted? Why do I face these difficulties?

And how in the face of that difficulty can I come to have confidence in God that he's not afar off, that he's not forgotten, that he's not indifferent?

David was afflicted by very serious enemies. We don't know the specific enemies that David had in mind when he wrote this psalm, but we know something of the character of those enemies. They were hate-filled toward David. They were arrogant. They were oppressive. They were violent. They were godless. And sometimes I think when we read these psalms, we wonder, well, do I really identify with that situation?

[5 : 40] I'm not sure that anyone is actually after me to try to kill me for being a Christian. Most of us don't live in that world. And yet the reality is that the Christian church as a whole still lives in that world.

There are Christians who live in situations that are just as violent as the situation in which David lived. But all of us live in an environment where there is still opposition to us and to our faith. The secularism that surrounds us, false religion that surrounds us and would ridicule us as God's people. But the scripture reminds us that the enemies we face are not just human enemies. We often summarize the enemies that we face as the world, the flesh, and the devil. The world that is out there that opposes our faith. But one of the great enemies we face is our own flesh, isn't it? The sin that continues to abide within us. The doubt that can grip us. That too becomes an enemy. It's not who we really want to be. It's not who we really are in Christ.

[6 : 48] And yet, nonetheless, that flesh can be so powerful within us as an enemy of all that God stands for. Then Paul reminds us in Ephesians chapter 6, doesn't he, that the devil remains our great enemy.

For we fight not against flesh and blood, Paul wrote in Ephesians 6, 12, but against heavenly powers, spiritual powers, dark forces in heavenly realms.

The devil is a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour, coming often with accusations, often with temptations, to try to overwhelm our soul. There are enemies to our soul.

And in that situation where we're facing enemies, when we're facing affliction, when we're wondering, where is God in the midst of our need? We need to learn to trust.

We need to learn to have confidence. We need to learn, as David did, how to be more confident, more trusting in God, to be able to enter into that assurance, to the joy that we find in this psalm.

[7 : 58] Which, as I've said, David was not able automatically to sing or easily to sing, but he had come to know his God and to have confidence in him.

So how do we learn to trust? Well, I think in this ninth psalm, David suggests three ways. David is always the preacher's friend, dividing things into three.

So here, David suggests three ways in which we grow in trusting in God, even in the face of real difficulties we encounter in this life. First of all, David says, we grow in trust, we learn to have confidence in God by praising God.

This psalm begins with praise, verses 1 and 2, and calls us to continue that praise in verses 11 and 12. Sing praises to the Lord who sits enthroned in Zion.

Tell among the peoples his deeds. God wants us to be a people filled with praise. praise. And the character of that praise is that we should take that praise upon our lips.

[9 : 07] Over and over, we're told to do that. We're told to thank God. We're to tell about God.

We're to rejoice in God. We're to exult in God. We're to sing to God. And David says, with our whole hearts.

We're to be engaged as a people who recognize in our praise and declare with our mouths, how great is our God. Here, God is addressed as Lord, Yahweh, the great covenant name of God.

He's addressed as the Most High so that we might be reminded our God is the powerful God. Our God is the great God. Our God is the covenant keeping God.

Our God is the one who has acted in history. Our God is the God who is faithful and we need to praise Him. We need to thank Him. We need to make Him known.

We need to take His praise on our lips so that He might be exalted and, as another psalm says, might be enthroned on the praises of Israel. And we praise Him, this psalm says, for His wonderful

deeds.

[10:18] It's interesting. This psalm doesn't go very far in explaining particular deeds to focus on. It's as if it says, praise Him for all of His wonderful deeds among us.

Praise Him as the God who acts. Praise Him as the God who has acted in history and continues to act among us and will act to bring history to a conclusion.

See, part of the difficulty that David faced is the temptation to ask, why is God far off? why has God forgotten? Is God not good?

Does God not hear? Can God not save? Why is God not acting? And in our praise, we are to remind ourselves and to remind others that God is the God who acts, that He acted in bringing this world into creation by the word of His power, that He acted to lead Israel out of Egypt and into the promised land, that He acted in Jesus Christ to redeem His people and to pay for their sins upon the cross, that He acted in Christ to raise Him from the dead to show that He's the Lord of life. God acted in sending forth the Holy Spirit at Pentecost to begin to create a people for His name, a church that would spread around the world. God has acted in every century to build that church and to continue to gather a people from every nation and tribe and tongue.

[11:50] And so God is still acting. And in our praise of His wonderful deeds, we know that He's the one who acts.

And here in this psalm, God is celebrated particularly for acting in judgment against the wicked and in mercy for the afflicted. And we praise Him for that.

He's a God who will not ignore wickedness, but will act in judgment. And that's a solemn warning for everyone. But He's also the God who has acted in Jesus Christ for mercy for the afflicted, to redeem.

And that's our hope. That's our confidence. That's the source of our growing in trust in our God. And that's why we as Presbyterians, Reformed people, have always believed that the character of our praise is so important.

we've always said the way in which we praise God is central to our worship and to our life as Christians. It's central to our growing in confidence.

[12:55] If we want to be full of trust, we need to be filled with wonderful praise. Shallow praise will only produce shallow Christians, we've believed.

And so we've wanted to take upon our lips praise that is filled with our God and His glory and with wonder for Him to move our hearts to draw near to Him. That's why God gave us a book of praises to show us how He wants to be praised.

The Hebrew name for the book of Psalms is the book of praises. God knew that as human beings we were inclined to get praise muddled. So He gave us a whole book for how it ought to be done. That's why we've often regarded the Psalms as the model, the pattern for our praise. And praises that are full of God will make Christians that are full of confidence in God.

That's what we have in the Psalter. That's what we need to have in our worship and in our lives that our hearts would be drawn to God in this way. So how do we learn to have trust in our God?

[14:01] Well, first of all, we need to be praising Him, this psalm suggests. And secondly, we need to be pondering who our God is. We need to be thinking about Him.

We need to be meditating upon Him. We need to be remembering Him. We need to be reviewing who He is and what He has done. That's what this psalm does for us in two sections, verses 3-10 and 15-18.

The psalmist pauses to think about this God. He pauses to ponder, to meditate upon who this God is. Actually, that's the biggest part of this psalm.

Over half of it is given just to thinking about God, just renewing ourselves in who He is and what He means for us. And particularly, this psalm says, as we think about our God, we need to remember that He is sovereign in justice.

He is sovereign in justice. Verses 3-6, David reflects on how God has been sovereign for Him in justice in times past.

[15:16] David writes, When my enemies turn back, they stumble and perish before Your presence, for You have maintained my just cause, You have sat on the throne giving righteous judgment, You have rebuked the nations, You have made the wicked perish, You have blotted out their name forever and ever.

The enemy has come to an end in everlasting ruins, their cities You rooted out, the very memory of them has perished. In the past, He says, You have preserved us, O Lord, in Your sovereignty according to justice and according to righteousness.

And what You've done in the past, we know You're doing now. Verses 7 and 8. But the Lord sits enthroned forever. He has established His throne for justice and He judges the world with righteousness.

He judges the peoples with uprightness. Sometimes we wonder if there really is righteousness in this world. If there is anyone maintaining righteousness in this world.

Things seem often to be going from bad to worse. It's easy to read the headlines each morning and just wonder, how can that be happening? How can that be happening?

[16:33] But the psalmist reminds us that no matter what it is that we find discouraging, even especially when it seems that the wicked are flourishing, don't forget, God is on His throne.

He is upholding righteousness. He will come in the future. One of the characteristics of the ways the Hebrews wrote was that sometimes the future was so certain in their mind that they described it as already being in the past.

That's what we find in verses 15 to 17 of this psalm. I think David is really looking at the future, but he's so confident that God is in charge of the future that he describes it as past already.

He says, the nations have sunk in the pit that they made in the net that they hid. Their own foot has been caught. The Lord has made Himself known.

He has executed judgment. The wicked are snared in the work of their own hands. The wicked shall return to Sheol, all the nations that forget God. That expression of verse 17 is particularly arresting, I think.

[17:44] The wicked shall return to Sheol. I think that means not that they've actually been to Sheol yet, but that they are so much a people who are dead and bound for hell that their going there will be like going to their natural homeland.

It'll be like a return because they're so characterized by death and destruction. But the psalmist has that confidence that God is in control.

Almost half of this psalm is talking about God as sovereign in justice. The Bible wants us to know God is in charge. God will bring justice.

God will bring righteousness into this world. And so when we're feeling afflicted, we can be assured that God is in control. We can be sure that God is a stronghold for the afflicted.

He's not just in some sort of general way in charge, but he's in charge to be for his own, for his own people in their difficulties, a stronghold, a refuge, a safe place.

[18:55] And this psalm can speak of that in really beautiful ways. David in verse 18 can write, For the needy will not always be forgotten, and the hope of the poor shall not perish forever.

We may feel sometimes that the afflicted church of Jesus Christ, that we as Christians individually have been forgotten. But God says, Don't worry.

Don't worry. I haven't forgotten. I haven't forgotten. The cries of my people that go up to me will be heard and answered in my good time.

But even today, even today we are assured that God is our stronghold. Verse 9, God is a stronghold for the oppressed, a stronghold in times of trouble, a safe place for his people.

It's interesting, the enemies had built their great cities where they thought they were safe, but verse 6 says, The enemy came to an end in everlasting ruins.

[20:01] Their cities you rooted out, O Lord. They thought they had a stronghold in their fortified cities, but God cast those cities down. But God says to us as his people, the stronghold you have, the fortified city you have, the refuge you have, will never be cast down because it is the Lord himself.

It is I, God says to us as his people. I am your God. I have made you my people. I reach out my arm to bring you near to me. I myself am the stronghold for you.

And then I think one of the sweetest promises in all the scripture we find in verse 10. And those who know your name put their trust in you, for you, O Lord, have not forsaken those who seek you.

You, O Lord, have not forsaken those who seek you. Here's a promise of the Lord to memorize. It's difficult to say some promises are better than others, but here's a promise worth holding on to, committing to memory, clinging to.

For you, O Lord, have not forsaken those who seek you. If we seek the Lord, he will hear us. If we seek the Lord, he will provide for us.

[21 : 23] If we seek the Lord, he will not forsake us. That's a promise to everyone who belongs to him in Christ. And that's so important because how often do we pray and we pray and we pray and it doesn't seem we get an answer or at least not the answer we want.

Sometimes we can then begin to wonder whether the Lord has forsaken us. And in those times, we have to ponder a verse like this in our heart. Hide this verse in our heart and hold on to it and be reminded that the Lord does not forsake his own.

That the Lord hears the cry of the afflicted. Verse 12 is that promise for he who avenges blood is mindful of his own. He does not forget the cry of the afflicted.

The Lord does not forget his people but he has written their names into the book of life. And yet we read the names of the wicked are blotted out forever.

Of course, we know these promises, these assurances of God, particularly when we see the face of our Lord Jesus Christ because we know that in Jesus Christ all of our affliction has been born.

[22 : 38] He came to take upon himself all of our pain, all of our sin, all of our need. He was the one who was forsaken of God that we might never be forsaken.

And so it is in Jesus Christ as Paul taught us that all the promises of God are yea and amen. We know that we will never be forsaken for Christ has borne God's wrath against sin for us.

And Christ has become our stronghold. He is the priest who ever lives to intercede for us. He is the one glorified in heaven who cares for us.

And so in this psalm we see its fulfillment in Jesus Christ and we experience its sweetness in Jesus Christ. Sometimes it's interesting to read a psalm and ask how would this sound on the lips of our Savior.

And the psalms can take on a whole new character for us. Think of Jesus saying with the psalmist when my enemies turn back they stumble and perish before your presence for you have maintained my just cause and you have sat on the throne giving righteous judgment.

[23 : 54] Or think of Jesus confessing the Lord is a stronghold for the oppressed a stronghold in times of trouble and those who know your name put their trust in you for you O Lord have not forsaken those who seek you.

Or think of Jesus saying for he who avenges blood is mindful of them he does not forget the cry of the afflicted. Be gracious to me O Lord see my affliction from those who hate me O you who lift me up from the gates of death that I may recount your praises.

Or again verse 18 that we've read think again of this as the words of Jesus for the needy shall not always be forgotten and the hope of the poor shall not perish forever.

Jesus said that the Old Testament spoke of his resurrection and of his of his death and of his resurrection. In these words we hear the resurrection of our Savior foretold he was not forgotten in the grave but the Lord brought him forth the gates of death could not hold him and so he bore our affliction and he is our stronghold in times of trouble and because all of that's true because we've praised God for that because we've pondered that reality then we can also pray to this God.

David wants us to know that we grow in confidence not only in our praise and in our pondering but in our praying. Sometimes we're tempted to think well once we know the promises of God we don't have to pray for them because if God promised it then he'll do it right?

[25 : 38] But the Psalms always teach us that confidence in God leads us to prayer not away from prayer. The promises of God lead us to prayer not away from prayer.

It's interesting to think how much time do we spend grumbling venting our frustrations to others to finite creatures who perhaps can listen but can't actually do anything to change our circumstances. But our God is infinite in his power and he is gracious and full of love for his people and he calls on us to pray to him for he is able to hear and he is able to act.

Through the psalmist God gives expression to the whole range of our emotions to our grief to our sorrow to our fear in ways that I think sometimes we could even feel ashamed or embarrassed to do on our own.

That's why Calvin called the Psalms an anatomy of the human soul that God has given us license here to pour out our longings and our needs to plead with him as our father in heaven to pray to him to pray the Psalms to him and so God calls on us to pray and in our praying too we learn to trust because we pray for mercy verses 13 and 14 very personally David prays be gracious to me oh

Lord see my affliction from those who hate me oh you who lift me up from the gates of death that I may recount all your praises that in the gates of the daughter of Zion I may rejoice in your salvation he prays for mercy that he may be able to praise God and then he prays for justice the last verses of Psalm 9 arise oh Lord let not man prevail let the nations be judged before you put them in fear oh Lord let the nations know that they are but men let the nations know that they are but men the rulers of this earth are inclined to think that they're pretty significant that they amount to something that they're important but God says in the mouth of David let them just know that they are creatures let them know that they are dust let them acknowledge who really is in control who really is the protector of justice who really is the stronghold of the afflicted and in our praise and in our pondering and in our prayer we need to remember what God has done in showing that he is the great power that he is indeed our stronghold that the most powerful kingdoms on this earth cannot hold a candle to the kingdom of our Lord and of his

[28 : 40] Christ and his reign is forever and we too shall reign with him in glory and so Psalm 9 encourages us to be a people like David to be a people like John Knox a people like Christians throughout all of history who've faced days of great trouble who have faced days of terrible misery and loss but in the face of those struggles could say I will praise the Lord and though I do not understand your ways and though in my finite understanding I would change your ways nevertheless I will bow before you because I know that you are good and what you do is right that you are my stronghold in affliction and I trust you for I know that you have never forsaken those who seek you may that be the confidence and the faith of us all here today amen let us pray father of all mercies give us wisdom and knowledge of the Lord

Jesus Christ grant us more and more assurance in our hearts by your Holy Spirit to know that the same power at work in our Lord's resurrection is at work in us to give us faith and trust in your word help us to remain firm in this confession we pray grant that in this life our crosses to bear our sufferings will be as light yokes as we look with steadfast hope for the coming of our Savior Jesus Christ for whom we daily wait and in whose name we pray amen please stand for closing hymn continue To be firstly