

How long will this be?

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[0:00] Let's pray before we come to God's word. O Lord, please still our hearts tonight as we ponder your words to us.

! May they speak to our present situation and may you help your servant to be faithful to your word. May you keep us attentive and not distracted by worldly pleasures, but being captured and encouraged by your words tonight.

Lords, we need you. Speak, Lords, your servants are listening. May your word breathe life into us. Amen. Amen. Well, the title of my talk tonight is How Long Will This Be? How Long Will This Be? You might be asking this question tonight as we endure another lockdown period here in the UK. Well, as the vaccine is being rolled out, we see the light at the end of the tunnel.

However, you might still be asking this question. It's not easy. Or perhaps you're asking other questions. Why, Lord, have you brought this upon us?

[1:22] Where are you, God? Well, friends, we are not alone. God's people have asked these questions time and time again throughout the millennia.

Indeed, this psalm tonight is no exception. So please turn to Psalm 74 if you haven't already. Remember, he was the choir master.

As he looked at the world around him. The wicked prosper. Then he entered into the sanctuary, the temple, and finally found wisdom.

The godless will be destroyed. He had to re-evaluate, resolve, reflect on a new perspective.

Likewise, as we'll see tonight, the psalmist does much the same in a pitiful situation.

So look, friends, at the title of this psalm. You'll see it's attributed to Asaph, a masculine of Asaph.

[2:53] But as Steve said last week, this was also a music school. And Psalm 74 was written in a period after the first Asaph had lived and died.

So it must have been written by one of his descendants. From the conservatoire of Asaph. A modern day worship leader, musician, choir master.

Who was from the priestly tribe of Levites. Responsible for bringing temple praise to the people. So my first point is reality check.

Days of darkness. Days of darkness. Looking at verses 4 to 9. Friends, as I said, here we have a shared lament from the house of Judah.

Corporately, as the people. The situation is very bleak. Hence the psalmist pours out his soul to the Lord as the people of God suffer in days of darkness.

[4:01] Pleading, appealing, and crying out. As you saw from the text. Well, what is the context to this lament?

It's most probably the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BC. At the end of the king's period.

You can read about it in 2 Kings chapter 24 and 25 if you have time. It's quite lengthy. But it's worth looking at the context. It's not nice.

This is the setting for this psalm, I think. So let's spell it out. Let's look at it in graphic darkness. So please look at verses 4 to 8.

Firstly, do you see the repeated pronoun they in these verses? Verse 4.

[5:01] They set up. 5. They behaved. 7. They smashed. Sorry, 6. 7. They burned.

They defiled. 8. They said in their hearts. They burned. I think it's about seven times. They, they, they is emphasised.

The psalmist completes this horrific picture of complete annihilation by the Babylonians. He focuses on the results as if he has just seen all that has happened.

The very place where the choir master would have stood and directed praise. Now his voice is silenced. And all that is heard is the enemy's roar.

Did you see that? In verse 4. Your foes roared in the place where you met with us. They have hacked the temple to pieces like one madly cutting through a thicket of trees.

[6:15] Verse 5. They behave like men wielding axes to cut through a thicket of trees. The temple is now burnt down and there is no place to worship the God, worship God in the land.

Where there was holiness, purity, now there is defilement. Verse 7. They burned your sanctuary to the ground. They defiled your dwelling place, your name.

8b. They burned every place where God was worshipped in the land. There is not a single place to worship God.

Brothers, sisters, these are certainly dark days for Judah. We can read about it as well in Lamentations, chapter 2.

So please turn with me to Lamentations, chapter 2, verses 5 to 9. Lamentations is after Jeremiah the prophet.

[7:20] Actually, I think it was written by Jeremiah. Lamentations, chapter 2, 5 to 9.

This helps us. Verse 5. The Lord is like an enemy.

He has swallowed up Israel. He has swallowed up all her palaces and destroyed her strongholds. He has multiplied mourning and lamentation for the daughter of Judah. He has laid waste his dwelling like a garden.

He has destroyed the place of meeting. The Lord has made Zion forget her appointed feasts and her Sabbaths. In his fierce anger, he has spurned both king and priest.

The Lord has rejected his altar and abandoned his sanctuary. He has handed over to the enemy the walls of her palaces. They have raised a shout in the house of the Lord, as on the day of an appointed feast.

[8:29] The Lord determined to tear down the wall around the daughter of Zion. He stretched out a measuring line and did not withhold his hand from destroying.

He made ramparts and walls lament. Together they wasted away. Her gates have sunk into the ground. Their bars he has broken and destroyed. Her king and her princes are exiled among the nations.

The law is no more. And her prophets no longer find visions from the Lord. This is the context, brothers and sisters.

And added to Judah's woes, as we read there in verse 9, No prophets are left. If we go back to our passage in Psalm 74, it says that again in verse 9, No prophets are left.

No one to give direction. God's spokesperson. Words of inside information. No more visions. There are no signs from God other than the signs of his righteous anger.

[9:45] The destruction of Jerusalem. Did you notice the twist in the passage I just read? The Lord has ordained it.

He has, he has, he has, the Lord has. This has happened due to Israel's sin. Her prostitution to other gods.

She has deserted the one who loves her. This is God's punishment as she has broken the covenant.

Jeremiah had told the kings, as well as Ezekiel, that these things would happen. But these prophets were denounced. She is getting her comeuppance for her sin.

Jerusalem, the once glorious city where David ruled supreme. Where there was safety. Prosperity.

[10:53] Happiness. God living with his people. A picture of a fruitful vine or a plentiful fig tree. Is now a pile of rubble. In the hands of the enemy.

The northern tribes already have been expelled. Now Judah, the final bastion of God's people. Defeated. In exile.

Babylon is weeping. This is reminiscent perhaps of Dresden in Germany. After allied bombers had destroyed that city.

Where there had been buildings everywhere. After it was bombed, it was levelled and flattened. The landscape changed overnight.

Imagine turning up to Calvary Church on Sunday. Oh how you wish to do that. And seeing the whole building, this building.

[11:54] Burnt to smithereens. How would you feel? Not only that, but most of our city is destroyed. The pavilion is burnt down.

The palace pier gone. Like the other one. Most of the regal houses in our city burnt down. Churches torched. Important buildings ruined.

Ransacked. A war zone. Do you get the picture? God's people feel completely abandoned by God. Like slaves again in a foreign land.

Added to this. Did you see in the text? The enemy is mocking God. Deriding him. No wonder they say, why lords?

How long? They cry. These are days of darkness. Adversity for the people of God. Brothers, sisters, friends.

[12:57] Let's have a reality check. Those days of darkness show us that as Christians, when we go through these days, we are not inoculated from them, from the ups and downs of life.

We will have dark days. And it's reassuring to know that this is part and parcel of the Christian life. There will be times for the believer, whether this is physical pain or mental.

Loneliness, death, illness, frustration, pandemics, feeling low, facing ridicule. Perhaps we're experiencing that at the moment. And for our church, as a group of people at this present time, it's fair to say that we have been struggling in many areas.

Lack of leaders in the eldership, diaconate, death of loved ones. Members leaving for various reasons. Folk, some folk on the fringes of the church, seemingly drifting away.

Not being able to meet physically here in the building. Solitude, shock, lockdown blues, stress in the family, feeling overburdened.

[14:16] Unemployment, financial problems, work stress and relationship breakdown. Days of darkness.

Nobody said it was easy. Coldplay were right. In the Gospel of John, Jesus tells his disciples in chapter 16, verse 33.

In this world, you will have trouble. Paul and Barnabas tell the disciples in Acts 14.

Well, actually, I think it's Paul. Just after Paul has nearly been stoned to death. He says, we must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God.

Remember Paul. He was shipwrecked, I think, three times. Lashed. Lacerated on his back. He was beaten. He was on the run from people who wanted to kill him.

[15:23] He didn't have it easy. So let's have a reality check tonight, brothers and sisters. There will be darkness for us as believers. But as someone said, in days of darkness, we must learn to say the creed.

Challenge experience with truth. And here, Romans chapter 5, verses 1 to 5 helps us. So please turn to it, brothers and sisters, friends, if you have a Bible.

Romans 5, verses 1 to 5. In the New Testament. This is Paul speaking. Romans 5, 1 to 5.

Romans 5, 1 to 5.

Of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings. Because we know that suffering produces perseverance.

[16:56] Perseverance, character, and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame. Because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit.

Who has been given to us. Tim Chester puts it beautifully. Why should we boast in suffering? Why should we boast in suffering?

Because in God's hands, suffering can increase our hope. Hope is like a muscle. It grows strong when it's exercised.

And suffering is like a spiritual exercise regime. Suffering forces us to look ahead to the glory.

If we just look at our circumstances, then we might give up. But if we look ahead, we can persevere.

[17:59] So suffering produces perseverance. Do that enough times and it becomes a habit. Repeat a habit enough times and it becomes your

character.

If we think like this, adversity is actually good for us.

The psalmist, having stared at the smouldering rubble of Jerusalem, lamenting this darkness, then goes to the beacon of Zion.

As if he was there. Perhaps he was there at that time. And he goes to the top of the hill and he gets a better perspective. The psalmist now does a wise thing and focuses on something better.

My second point is reality check two. Get the right perspective. Looking at verses 12 to 17. Gets the right perspective.

[19:14] Like Asaph in Psalm 73. His relative gets a better perspective. He stops looking at the immediate situation and turns his eyes towards God.

Did you notice the change of tone in verse 12? That contrast linker. But. But you, oh God. His darkness now turns to rays of light.

He speaks to himself of past realities. Spot the change of pronoun from they to you. Did you see that?

Verse 12. But you, oh God. You bring salvation. 13. It was you. You broke. 14.

It was you. 15. And it was you who opens. 17. You dried up. 17.

[20:19] It was you who said. Perhaps there was seven times there. Number of perfection. His perspective changes. What does he remind himself of?

That God is my king. Verse 12. Not a Judean king who can let you down. The kingdom has ended. He reminds himself of God's miraculous power.

Did you see? And Israel's history. In verse 13 and 15. It was you who split open the sea by your power.

It was you who opened up springs and streams. You dried up the ever-flowing rivers. He remembers God split the sea, the Red Sea, by his power to save his people from the Egyptians. Wow. That is Yahweh. That is my God. God dried up the river Jordan. So his people could cross through it.

[21:26] To conquer the promised land. He recalls that. And also he remembers. Perhaps even more magnificently. That God has created the whole world.

Did you see that? In 16 and 17. The day is yours and yours also the night.

You established the sun and the moon. It was you who set all the boundaries of the earth. You made summer and winter. Wow. He made all this. The whole of the cosmos. The planets.

And they're still going. And they're still going around. Summer and winter. We're in winter. What a God. He can see it.

He knows it. He recalls it. He gets the right perspective. The psalmist talks to himself. Encourages himself.

[22:26] We need to do this as well. Don't listen to our voices in our heads. Let's speak the truth of God to ourselves in the darkness.

This will help us. Feel reminded of us. This. Reminded. This. Of us. No. Reminded us recently. Friends.

Let's remember God's character. What he has done for his people. Let's get a better perspective. In the book.

The Last Battle. The final book. Of the Chronicles of Narnia. King Tyrion. The last Narnian king. Is tied to a tree. Bound and helpless. Cold and perplexed at night.

He remembers the past. How the mighty Aslan. Had always intervened. In Narnia. When the situation was bleak. He gets a better perspective.

[23:29] He remembers. Instead of focusing on his situation. He recalls the saving power of Aslan. Tyrion finally cries out. To Aslan.

In his affliction. Aslan hears. And sends aid. Eustace and Jill. Come. Friends. We have the real Aslan.

Let us remember. What he has done for us. Action point one. Look to the cross. As I said this morning. In my devotion. He has set us free.

From the burden. Of guilt and shame. Our rebellion against him. He. Who was once our enemy. Has become. A loving friend. Who will never forsake us.

Remember. We can come back to him. Daily for forgiveness. We may look back. Like the psalmist. [24:26] To the past. And recall. That indescribable love. Which God has lavished upon us. By dying. In our place. On the cross. Friends.

Let us get a better perspective. All we have to do. Is look at the cross. To do this. Where God. Was abandoned.

He was in utter darkness. So that his righteous anger. Would not fall on us. Let us count our blessings.

In Christ. Let us meditate. On the fact. That he loves us. Unconditionally. Despite our horrid thoughts. And behaviour. He is interceding for us. Right this moment.

And by his spirit. Helps us. Through our journey. How much he loves us. Let us be confident. And look.

[25:21] To Christ. And the cross. He has beaten death. Action point one. Look to the cross. Second action point. Bring God. Into our circumstances.

That is very helpful. Friends. Let's do that. In verse three. From the psalm. We read. Turn your steps. Towards.

These everlasting ruins. The psalmist cries out. God. Come into my circumstances. Turn your feet. Towards me. Come into my afflictions.

Let Christ. The choir master. He's the leader. Be the leader. And us. We are part of the choir. Brothers and sisters. We can cry out to him.

Do so. So to conclude. Let's get perspective. We are in a better position. Than the psalmist. In many ways. Not least.

[26:17] That we have been saved. For a mighty king. The Lord Jesus Christ. The psalmist. Didn't have this benefit. His earthly. Messiah king. Gave him no hope. Ours.

Gives us eternal hope. How long would the exile last? Well. Around 50 years. And the Israelites. Could go back to their land. And start rebuilding their lives.

The temple. But it was never the same. Not like the good old days. God was ushering in. A better era. Asaph's prayer was answered.

And this was God's plan. To bring the Davidic kingdom. To a halt. And bring a new kingdom. Through Christ. His church. And we are still asking the question.

How long Lord? But this time. How long. Until you come back. To finally judge the earth. And fully redeem your creation. We don't know when this will be.

[27:14] And we can't answer all the whys. But we don't have to. The Lord knows. And he will answer them. In his perfect timing. We are called to live.

By faith. Trusting in the finished work of Christ. And to call out to him. In our daily struggles. As we walk this path. Being obedient to him.

Let's get the right perspective. In our days of darkness. Brothers and sisters. If you're not a Christian tonight. May I challenge you. To think seriously.

About your life. What real hope do you have. What hope do you have in this life. Especially in this pandemic. Christ offers you light. In your darkness.

All you need to do is call on him. And you will be saved. As you heard. The Christian life is not a bed of roses. It does have its challenges. It is a fight.

[28:10] But with Christ with you. It is far better. Because he has won the victory. Let's pray. Heavenly Father.

We come to you tonight. And we realise. That some of us are in days of darkness. Lord. It's not easy. During this pandemic. There is solitude.

Loneliness. We can't hug people. As we used to. And it's difficult as a church. We don't meet physically together. Some of us are wearied.

And we bring our cries to you. We thank you. As the psalmist. We can cry on out to you. Lord. And we thank you. That you are a God. That answers our cries.

That you listen to your people. And Lord. Lord. May we get a better perspective. May we look to Christ. Look at the cross. And see the beauty.

[29:12] The love. Of Christ Jesus. And ask you. To be a part of our circumstances. As we walk. This path. Of faith. Lord.

May we be obedient to you. Obedient to your words. May you lead us. By your spirit. Lord. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

Amen.