

A psalm for new year

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Date: 01 January 2023

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[0:00] You meditate in your word will bear fruit and not dry up. their leaves will not wither and they will bear fruit in season.

and we ask for that promise to be made good for us. Please be our helper, help listener and speaker alike for your glory through Jesus Christ.

Amen. Amen. Well, here we are in a new year and just thinking of the past few years, we had our meal out with Dean together just a couple of weeks ago, was it?

A Christmas meal. We haven't done that for a three-year period. So things have been rather different over the last three years. We've had lockdowns.

We've had restrictions. We've had anxious times. We've had losses. As the Puritans used to say, losses and crosses.

[1:07] Things we've lost and things that have gone across what we had hoped were the case. We've got war in Europe. We've got an energy crisis. We've got a cost of living crisis.

We've got strikes. We've got conflict. Who can count the number of prime ministers we've had in the last few months and chances of the exchequer?

It's 2022 is the year that the Queen died. And we now have a King. And those of us who sing the national anthem have got used to singing, God save our gracious King.

So lots of changes. And as a church, well, lots of things we've been through together. We've got much to be thankful for.

And we really need to remind ourselves of that. But the future is still very much a matter of prayer, which is why I mentioned the week of prayer coming up.

[2:03] And if you wanted to, you could put it as impossibilities that stand in our way like mountains and obstacles in the way of seeing God's kingdom grow as we would like it to grow, like the tidal wave of the sea.

And I've chosen Psalm 114 because it speaks about a God who turns the tide and who moves mountains. And that's the God I'd like to draw to our attention, I'd like to focus upon for a few minutes this morning.

So for what it's worth a plan, we'll look at the context, we'll look at the ingredients of the psalm, we'll look at the poetry of the psalm, and we'll look at the God of the psalm. And that's roughly the way I'm going to try and navigate through it.

It's only a few verses, isn't it? Let's read it again. Psalm 114. When Israel came out of Egypt, the house of Jacob from a people of foreign tongue, Judah became God's sanctuary, his holy place. Israel, his dominion, the place where the king reigns. The sea looked and fled. It's a running away word. It ran away. Jordan, the river Jordan, turned back.

[3:21] Mountains skipped like rams, the hills like lambs. And then this question, why was it, O sea, that you fled? O Jordan, that you turned back. You mountains that you skipped like rams, you hills like lambs.

This is a sort of sarcastic question. What was up with you lot then? And then an answer comes, tremble, O earth, at the presence, same word for face actually, at the face of the Lord, the face of the God of Jacob, who turned the rock into a pool.

He provided water in the desert. The hard rock into springs of water. That's the psalm. Let's look at it. Let's look at the context. So what we've got here, we have a psalm.

It's a song. It's an ancient song of Israel. That's what the psalms are. Songs of the people of God. So we've got some music. And let's not think that they are irrelevant psalms, psalms are relevant ancient hymn book, because Jesus thought it was a great hymn book.

And a lot of times, I haven't got references for this, he would have sung the psalms, and a lot of the things that he said and did were controlled and informed and expressive of the psalms.

[4:38] You think of Psalm 22, where Jesus on the cross says, quotes the psalm, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me? And so on and so on.

The psalms are not just songs of emotion. They are a huge source of teaching. They teach us what Messiah does in Psalm 2.

He rules the nations with a rod of iron. Kiss the sun lest he be angry and you perish in the way. Blessed are all those who take refuge in him.

There are large amounts of teaching in the psalms, and they tell us about God and his greatness. But they are singable things. And we don't always do this, but we do in our repertoire of songs have all the psalms.

And if we wanted to, we could sing them through from beginning to end. And I would encourage you as a church to always be singing psalms. You know, not all the time, but as time goes on.

[5:43] And, of course, singing, as we have found this morning, it sort of involves the soul, doesn't it? The very act of singing, because it's a physical act, and it's an emotional act, and it's a mental act, to sing with meaning and emotion.

That's what the psalms are all about. And this psalm has got meaning and emotion and inspiration in it, as I'm going to try and point out. In terms of the context of it, there are groupings of psalms. If you look in your Bible, this psalm is in a little cluster of psalms which all have praise the Lord at the beginning of it. Psalm 111 begins praise the Lord.

Psalm 112 begins praise the Lord. Psalm 113 begins praise the Lord. And it ends with the words praise the Lord. And some scholars suggest that maybe the ending has got shifted from the beginning of Psalm 114, because there isn't a praise the Lord at the beginning of Psalm 114.

And Psalm 115 ends with praise the Lord. And Psalm 116 ends with praise the Lord. And Psalm 117 ends with praise the Lord. So I think there's a message there, is there, do you think?

[6:59] That we should praise the Lord. Yes, that's right. So these psalms are telling us about how great and praiseworthy God is. And I don't think we should leave that sort of an abstract fact.

We shouldn't really be content until we've been carried into that too. And that we are agreeing with and wanting to participate in and saying, the God I worship is great.

And I want to praise Him. And wherever I am in my life, whatever burdens I'm under, whatever physical condition I'm in, I still want to praise the Lord.

Because He is still good. And He is still great. Whatever my circumstances, that's who He is. Praise the Lord. The psalm is short, but my job this morning is to try and persuade everybody here that it is a powerful psalm.

It tells us about the events that were read to us in a sort of historical narrative form in Exodus 14, about the Exodus, which we'll come to in a moment.

[8:09] It is poetry. If you look at it, there's lots of things that are repeated. When Israel came out of Egypt and then said again, the house of Jacob from a people of a foreign language.

And then, the sea looked and fled, repeated in a way. Jordan turned back. The mountains skipped like rams and the repetition, the hills like lambs.

And then another, coming back to the idea of the sea. Why did you flee, O sea? Then a repetition of the idea of the Jordan. Why did you turn back, O Jordan?

Then a repetition of the idea of the mountains. Why did you skip like rams? And the repetition of the idea of the hills, you hills like lambs. So there's lots of sort of emphasis.

And this Hebrew poetry reminds me of those, did you get one of these in your Christmas cracker? Those little puzzles with sliding rectangular blocks that you move them round and you try and rearrange a jumbled word or picture into the right sort of picture.

[9:16] Do you know what I mean by those? And the psalmist tends to do that. He'll take something and then move it round a bit and do it again and then move it round a bit. And you can see that he does a bit of that in this psalm.

So let's, so just sort of, if you're not familiar with psalms, I hope that gives you some idea of what's going on in a psalm in general.

So the context. Number two, the ingredients. And the ingredients are basically the facts of Israel's history, which let's just remind ourselves of them.

Israel went out from Egypt, which is described here as a people of a foreign tongue. You know, not Israelites.

Strange. A strange people. Not worshippers of God. They don't sing the songs of God. It's all different and alien.

[10:21] And that's where they were. And they were slaves there, weren't they? They were slaves in Egypt. It's a bad place to be. And God took them out.

Israel came from Egypt. The house of Jacob. It's another way of saying Israel, isn't it? The house of Jacob from the people of a foreign tongue. So from the place of the pyramids to God's sanctuary. And I hope to come back to this, but the word sanctuary means a holy place. So they've gone from a pagan place, an unclean place, to become a holy place.

It uses the word Kodesh for holiness. And, so a repetition here, Judah became God's sanctuary and Israel his dominion.

So a word for being under the rule of, in the kingdom of. So we've got the idea of going to become a sanctuary and somewhere I've got a crown, but I don't think I've got it in the right place.

[11:32] They, and we're told the sea looked back and fled and Jordan turned back. So the events are that the Red Sea parted to let the people through when pursued by Pharaoh.

I tried to draw the Red Sea parting and you go through on the dry land bit across the sea. That's what Mark read to us, isn't it? And I was thinking what it would have been like.

It all happened in the dark. You've got this army shouting at you and got the wind blowing and everybody panicking and the Lord says, just be still and you'll see what happens and the wind blows and that the sea gets parted and Moses said, off we go and you think, ah, not sure about this. Never done this before but they go through and then the army with the chariots, we're going to get you, we're going to get you and they're over there and we've got to this side and the army over there is still shouting at us and they decide to come trundling after us and we think, oh no, what's going to happen?

and Moses does the appropriate thing with his hand and the waters come back and the whole army is drowned and what a thing.

[12:48] That doesn't happen every day, does it? But it had happened then. So both of these have got motion. They moved from Egypt to Israel.

They crossed the Red Sea. The sea moved out of the way and I think there's a reference to the giving of the law. When they came out of Egypt, they came to Mount Sinai and God gave the ten words and a lot more as well.

This is how, once you've been redeemed, this is how I want you to live. You've been brought from a place of impurity and unwholesomeness and this is the wholesome, pure life, the law.

And it was said that when the law was given, the mountain trembled and it talks about the mountain trembling.

I tried to do trembling. I ended up just with arrows. And they cross from the Red Sea. They cross the Red Sea.

[14:02] They're not there yet. They've got a long way to go across the desert to the promised land and they go through the desert and you know the story that this actually, though they could have done it much quicker, it took them 40 years.

But during those 40 years, they learned invaluable lessons that God could look after his people. Do you remember he fed them with? Manna.

And he brought them water out of the rock. He took them to various oases, but he brought them water out of the rock. And he fed them and kept them alive with water.

It was said that their shoes never wore out and he just kept them going in his patience towards a rather obnoxious group of people. But he kept them going despite their ingratitude and unbelief, et cetera, et cetera.

As they crossed the dry, deadly desert, as they crossed the dry, deadly desert, God made water spring from the rock. And do you remember that Moses smacked the rock?

[15:05] He whacked the rock and the water came out and he tried to do it again and that was wrong. And he paid the price for doing that out of his frustration, I guess. You can only hit the rock once.

Jesus died on the cross once. He was smitten once. Not to be repeated. Just once. That's enough. Anyway, there they are.

Those are the ingredients of the psalm. So I'm just making sure everybody knows the story. You probably knew it anyway. But there it is, just to remind us. And I want to come back to the psalm and say it's now expressed poetically.

So the facts that I've reminded us of in the psalm are put in poetry. The history was the facts, but the poetry, well, because I was brought up as a scientist, I find it difficult to put into good words. But poetry does something different from history and facts, doesn't it? Poetry brings sort of, what have I put? Sort of, meaning that's under the surface.

[16:18] It gives us meaning. And it makes connections that aren't there, obviously, with the mere facts of history. And poetry has a power which the mere facts don't necessarily have in and of themselves.

And I thought, as I was thinking about this overnight, inspiration, I should have put inspiration, poetry can inspire in a way that just facts don't.

And this psalm, I'm going to try to persuade you, I hope God will help me to do that, gives a meaning and a connection and a power and an inspiration to the facts.

So, let's think about the sea. The sea. We live by the sea. We're blessed in living by the sea, I think. Do you remember when we used to have Swiss-German students who lived in the mountains? I think mountains are fantastic, actually. But they always wanted to go and see the sea. Because they didn't have sea.

[17:20] And we have sea. What is the sea like? We went for a walk the other day. No, we didn't go for a walk. I was trying to get to Saltdean.

And I was late. And I was cycling along the seafront. And I whizzed past Joss and Estelle. And I think I whizzed past you guys as well, didn't I? I was doing 17 miles an hour.

But I just thought, and the sea was whooshing over the seawall. Wow! It was really powerful. And as my son and I were cycling down there, he actually got splashed with a wave.

And that was just ordinary sea. It wasn't a tsunami or anything like that. But sea is a big, powerful thing. If you want to go to France, you have to deal with the sea, don't you?

If you want to go to the Isle of Wight, you have to deal with the sea. I mean, have you ever tried walking to France? You thought, you know, I will just stand here.

[18:24] It's quite convenient for me if the sea would part. And I'll just say, would you just like to part for me? And I'll walk, save myself. It doesn't work like that, does it? You can't even, by your word and power, reverse a tap or make your bath water move to one side.

The sea is a big, powerful thing. And in this psalm, it says, the sea looked and fled. The sea just got out of the way.

It's impossible to turn back the sea. It's too big. I'll just give you the example of my seafront walk. But the sea, on this case, just ran away like a frightened child.

The same word is used of the defeated army of Egypt. They ran away. The same word is used for the Philistines when Goliath was struck down.

Well, the Philistines saw that their hero was dead and they ran away. And here, the sea runs away. And Jordan, big river Jordan, when I was born in Bridge North, which has the river Severn going through it.

[19:40] Big, brown, slimy, huge river. Sometimes it floods in low town. Rivers much like the sea in that case.

It's impossible to change the course of a river, is it? Have you tried doing that? I expect when you're a child, you probably did sandcastles by the sea, didn't you? Try and build a little wall to stop the sea coming in.

No, it's a pointless exercise, isn't it? Likewise with rivers. I've been, Facebook loves to show me some pictures of people going through, trying to drive through a Ford.

I don't know where it is. But every time they try and drive through it, they get stuck. Because a Ford, in other words, driving through a river, you need very special equipment to do that.

And it was only a titchy little river. It's a big thing. And the River Jordan, it says, when they tried to cross the River Jordan, it fled. It turned back.

[20:41] It said, oh, I was going to go that way. No, I'll go this way. And the River Jordan turned back. Interestingly, the Lord Jesus could do things with water. He rebuked the stormy sea, didn't he?

He didn't dry it up, but he did say, be quiet. And it went flat. And he did walk on water.

He didn't have to dry it up. He just made the water behave itself so that he could walk on it. Jesus could do stuff with water. But it's put here in a poetic way.

The sea ran away. The River Jordan changed its mind and went a different way. And the mountains. Why was it, oh, mountains? Mountains. What do mountains speak of?

They speak of permanence, solidity, dependability. God is a rock because he is solid, permanent, dependable.

[21:49] Before the mountains were brought forth, you, oh, Lord, our God. Before that very permanent thing was put into creation. And if you try and get around a mountain, people who've been to Switzerland know how the roads, you can't just go through a mountain.

You have to go around it, don't you? Occasionally, they tunnel through it. But basically, the roads go around the mountain because a mountain's there. You can't make it move.

You have to move around it. It's an obstacle, an immovable. So you know that if you're building roads. And the psalm says, mountain, what did you do?

You jumped out of the way like a little lamb. I've got a picture of a lamb jumping. I found quite a few. They're a lot of charming pictures of these little lambs skittling about, jumping about in the springtime.

I've never seen this happening. Have you seen it happen in real life? Yeah, okay. I shall need to look out in future. But he says, you great mountains that were so solid and wouldn't go anywhere no matter what people did.

[22:57] You just jumped out of the way like a little lamb. It's repeated twice. twice. The idea of a mountain jumping up into the air and bouncing out of the way.

Interestingly, Jesus had some things to say about mountains moving as well actually. He says, if you have faith and do not doubt, if you say to this mountain, be taken up and thrown into the sea, it will happen.

This is an interesting saying of Jesus, isn't it? I think he means a mountain that gets in the way of what God wants to do. If you have a mountain like that and if you ask in prayer, you will receive if you have faith.

It's a very interesting, rather challenging thing that Jesus said, isn't it? About moving mountains. That through his church, he will move mountains if, there's an if, if you trust him, if you believe he can do stuff like that and if you pray, which again brings us back to the idea of having a week of faithful prayer that mountains might be moved in 2023.

Faith and prayer. And so we've got these sort of poetic pictures of the sea skittling away and the mountains hopping into the air moving out of the way because, well, why?

[24:23] And that's the question. Why did you do that? What's going on? It's a little bit like a taunting question. Like, now, was it Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, you know, why isn't your God answering prayer?

Has he gone to the toilet or something? Has he left his phone off the hook? You remember those rather sarcastic questions that Elijah asked with the prophets of Baal? You remember that? And it's a little bit like that, isn't it?

So, so, see, what was up with you then? You jumped out of the way. Mountains, what's up with you then? That you fall over yourselves to oblige and scurry along in so prompt a fashion.

What's going on with you? And what's the answer to the question? Well, the answer is in verse 7. And verse 7 has got a bit of a repetition in it, as has verse 8.

But it's a single answer. The thing that caused all these movements and jumping and skedaddling was the face of God.

[25:34] Tremble, O earth, at the presence of the Lord. The word there, Lord, is not the word for Jehovah or Yahweh. The word is Master.

Tremble, Tremble, at the presence of the Master, the Lord. The same thought is expressed in Revelation 20, verse 11, where the great white throne was set up and earth and sky fled away from the face of the Lord.

From His face, the face of this God, the presence of this almighty, majestic, glorious, holy God, in His presence, O earth, tremble.

Flee away. This reminds me of the seraphim, wasn't it? With the six wings, with two, He flew. With two, did He not cover His face, and two, He covered His feet. A sort of sense of the humility of these most holy creatures in the presence of the Holy One.

[27:08] Daniel, when he prays about the state of Israel, he says, face-wise, to us belongs confusion of face before your face.

That's us in a way, isn't it? How would we dare look on the face of the almighty one? Like Peter, do you remember the occasion when Jesus had predicted that Peter would betray Him, or disown Him rather, not betray, disown.

And Peter said, no Lord, I'll never do that. And of course, He did. I don't know this man. And remember, there was that look of Jesus across at Peter on that fateful evening.

poor guy turned and wept, didn't he? So ashamed of himself at the face of Jesus. And there's more to say on this, but let me just stop on this bit.

Let us remember the greatness of God. Let's remember His holiness and His majesty. and just in and of ourselves, if that was all, we would not dare to look Him in the eye.

[28:31] We would not dare to come into His holy presence. We would tremble and skedaddle or like Peter when the miraculous catch of fish depart from me for I am, what does he say, I am a sinful man.

That's who God is. That would be our first reaction to Him. When I saw Him, I fell at His feet as dead. And it seems to me that if we've forgotten that, how can we worship if we've forgotten His majestic greatness, that He is the God before whom creation trembles?

If we've forgotten that, seems to me our worship is going to be very, very half-hearted and superficial. That's who God is.

Tremble, O earth, at the presence of the Lord. Creation bows before its maker. But, I'm going to enlarge on this idea of the face of coming into His presence.

Who is this God? God. He is the God of Jacob. And who was Jacob? Well, his name means trickster or deceiver or supplanter because even at the time he was born, he was trying to elbow his way into power and privilege that he didn't deserve.

[30:03] That's who Jacob was. And the God of Jacob is the God who takes Jacob people and as he did for Jacob turns this person into a prince with God.

Turns this trickster into a truster. Turns a deceiver into a follower. That's the God of Jacob.

That's what it is to be a Christian. To be taken from what we used to be to being someone else.

Somebody who despised and ignored and relativised the Lord Jesus put him into a little comfortable box perhaps to become a worshipper of Jesus and a follower of Jesus.

He is the God of Jacob. The God of redemption. The God who takes people from the gutter or as John Copley used to say from the gutter most to the uttermost.

He lifts us from where we were into his presence. That's an amazing thing. Isn't it? He does something so that we can look on his face without fear.

[31:14] He adopts us into his family so that rather it's simply being the God who makes us tremble. It's the God who is that same God who embraces us and lets us call him Abba Father.

That's a marvellous thing, Isn't it? He's the redeeming God. The presence of the God of Jacob. He takes the obnoxious spotty unlovable woman to be his spotless bride and that's what he's done for us and he's brought us in his love.

He's washed us and changed us and given us a new heart and enabled us to look on his face not with fear but with longing. We want to see his face don't we?

One day I shall see his face. I shall see him as he is and I think how kind of him to come for us that way and how grateful we should be.

That's what the Lord has done. Let's not forget that. From the gutter most to the uttermost. From enmity to being part of his family to being adopted as his children.

[32:33] That's a wonderful thing and he's a great and wonderful God and we should not forget that and we should remind ourselves to be grateful and thankful and not lose sight of that.

He takes a motley crew from Egypt slavery to be his holy place. There's a thing. His the place of his holiness the place of dignity wholesomeness purity and goodness.

He takes them out of Egypt to be his dominion where God reigns. We bring honour to the king and obedience to the king and love to the king.

This is what God does. I've moved on to the God of the psalm and if we just put it again into context this is what the psalm holds out as the thing the ideal.

Let me just point out that as the way the Bible progresses it becomes clear that ethnic Israel fails miserably at this and has been given hundreds and hundreds and hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of years of God's patience and when Jesus comes to Jerusalem on that last week he looks for fruit and he finds none apart from that one woman you remember who put in the little coin he says that's what I was looking for but the rest of it I find nothing and things changed and from the focus being on ethnic Israel the gates of the kingdom are opened wide to the nations and that's why most of us probably not all of us but that's why most of us are here this morning we are not ethnically Jews we are not sons of Jacob we are not children of

[34:28] Abraham except we follow in the faith of faithful Abraham and we've been adopted into a family that isn't ours and we've been brought into the commonwealth of Israel we've been brought to inherit these promises and that in itself is a marvellous thing isn't it ethnic Israel failed but the new covenant brings in the nations by the blood of Jesus and it's our calling brothers and sisters to follow him he's done this for us we're to follow him and become his sanctuary his holy place his dominion the place where he reigns tremble at his face trust his grace and take him up at his provision let's just look at one more word here he turns the rock into a pool the hard rock into springs of water now why does he do that why does this great god who makes mountains belt out of the way and who changes the course of tsunami style sea why does this god make little trickles of water streams come from a rock and the answer is because his people are thirsty give us this day our daily bread we pray in the lord's prayer he's a god this isn't really about an obstacle this is about an absence of life a life threatening absence of water and god says those people need water and i will use my almighty power to produce what these little people need they need water and i'll give them water so they don't dry up in the desert they don't get like dead camels sort of left with their bones bleached in the sun i will supply them with water streams of living water the rock is hard and dry and solid water is life giving and delightful and of course jesus had something to say about water didn't he he said actually the real streams of water don't come from whacking a rock in the desert i mean that's made all the difference to those people then but the fundamental need of men and women and boys and girls for life does not come from whacking a rock in the desert it comes from jesus dying on the cross shedding his blood and from his side when he was stabbed by the spear there came a flow of blood and water symbolic significant where do i find the streams of living water from the wounded side of jesus what gives me life what keeps me going what jesus did on the cross if anyone is thirsty said jesus let him come to me and drink and out of his belly will flow streams of living water jesus gives water to us that's the holy spirit he spoke of the spirit and we become little sources of the blessings of the spirit to other people which is another yet another amazing thing from his wounded side flowed blood and water so we've had a look at the psalm i've tried to sort of point out the features of it and the poetry of it brothers and sisters as we look

forward into this new year i think we should be realistic that we face many obstacles to the spread of the gospel according

to an article i think it was in the times recently the most unbelieving places in the uk i think was brighton norwich cambridge i can't remember where else it was but we're at the forefront of that our culture is set against the spread of the gospel and we are here to spread the gospel we think of the spiritually dead state of our city particularly the bright end of our city we have a huge task if we're to evangelize and see god's kingdom grow as we prayed it would we face impossibilities just as a very specific we do need to be praying for a team of elders to lead us forward into the future and not just one it strikes me that if we're going to have married people on our team we need to be thinking ahead for accommodation suitable for married people and we know how difficult accommodation is in

Brighton so there's a big impossibility we're looking to strengthen our team of deacons and this has been a long standing need which we want to keep on praying about and we the the state of the little conservative churches is parlous meaning you know in a bad state and we've been praying for Park Hill we pray for Ebenezer Reformed Baptist Church we've been praying for Grace Baptist Church or whatever it's called and if you're here on Christmas morning we had a fantastic time together we were pretty much full weren't we if we combine our forces like that that was really splendid but as little isolated we're struggling and we need reviving almighty power from the living God and we need provision to keep us going we all need that don't we we need to be upheld we need living water to keep us alive and make us flourish so with these obstacles and with these impossibilities the psalm tells us that we have a

God who can turn the tide who can move mountains and keep his people amen let's sing about the redeeming God there is a redeemer Jesus God's own son God God to God to have to have to