

A Psalm for Autumn

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Preacher: Rev Dr Will Storrar

[0:00] In the 30th Psalm, in verses 11 and 12, we read these words. You have turned my mourning into dancing.

You have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy,! So that my soul may praise you and not be silent.

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be pleasing to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer.

Amen. It is so good to be singing some old as well as new hymns that you have chosen for these Songs of Praise services.

Along with that classic redemption hymn, the old rugged cross, I'm sure the hearts of some of us here swelled as we sang the Boys Brigade anthem.

[1:09] I have to confess to being a Scout in my youth. But I took enough Boys Brigade services as a parish minister to know and love these words as well.

With the imagery of a ship in a storm at sea, the hymn asks us three searching questions.

Will your anchor hold in the storms of life? Will your anchor hold in the straits of fear? Will your anchor hold in the floods of death?

Which of us has not sailed in the storms of life? Which of us has not been tossed about in the straits of fear? Which of us has not dreaded the floods of death and our own mortality?

And yet, thank God, which of us has not also sung our faith's answer to such questions? We have an anchor that keeps the soul grounded firm and deep in the Saviour's love.

[2:17] This hymn is all about being delivered from danger and death through divine deliverance. God to the rescue.

The writer of the psalm that Mike read to us could certainly have sung our hymn with gusto. The psalmist's life is in crisis.

The psalmist knows what it is like to be storm-tossed, fear-gripped, and death-bound. But instead of imagining his life as like a ship on an angry sea, the psalmist imagines going down into a deep pit from which there is no escape.

O Lord, you brought up my soul from Sheol. Sheol restored me to life from among those gone down to the pit.

In the Old Testament, the pit is an image of death. And Sheol is the place of the dead. But instead of perishing in that pit of death, the Lord rescues the psalmist from that fate.

[3:32] O Lord, my God, I cried to you for help. And you have healed me. Reference to healing here naturally has led many to assume that the crisis the psalmist faced was one of severe illness, threatening his life.

This may well be the case. But as the psalm continues, we learn that the psalmist faced an even deeper crisis, a threat not only to his body, but also to his soul.

Here, the psalmist opens up his soul to us. He faced a spiritual crisis, a crisis in his relationship with his God.

Verse 6 and 7 of Psalm 30 describe the nature of that crisis. The psalmist tells us why his life was falling down as if into a deep pit.

Not only perhaps because he had been hit by some life-threatening event, but also because he had become complacent about his life.

[4:48] He writes, Everything was going well for the psalmist.

He saw his prosperity as a sign of God's favor. His life was secure like a strong mountain. But then it all fell apart. Perhaps an illness did indeed bring him to the edge of death.

But something far worse happened. He says to the Lord, You hid your face. I was dismayed.

The psalmist realizes that he's been relying for his security in life on his prosperity, and not on the God who had blessed his life with that prosperity.

The psalmist had forgotten that the deepest purpose of our existence as human beings is to know and praise God. The Westminster Shorter Catechism puts it so well.

[6:02] Our chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever. So much for serious Presbyterians.

The psalmist had forgotten that. But as he stares death in the face, he remembers the great calling of everyone created in the image of God and everyone given the breath of life as God's gift.

What profit is there in my death if I go down to the pit? Will the dust praise you? Will it tell of your faithfulness? Our great calling in life is to praise God and to tell of God's faithfulness to us.

That remains true throughout all the seasons of our life, but especially perhaps in the autumn of our lives when our strength fails, our prosperity fades, and we face our own mortality like the psalmist.

But it is precisely in that moment when the psalmist is at his lowest, hovering over that pit, that he comes to his senses like the prodigal son in the parable Jesus told.

[7:25] And he cries out, Hear, O Lord, and be gracious to me. O Lord, be my helper. The psalmist remembers that his help is in the name of the Lord, not in his own strength.

And so there is no more talk of being like a strong mountain. Instead, the psalmist extends an invitation to all God's people to join him in songs of praise to this faithful God.

Sing praises to the Lord, O you, his faithful ones, his saints, and give thanks to his holy name. The psalmist then tells us the meaning of God's holy name.

He tells us who God is and what God does for us in some of the most beautiful imagery in all of Scripture. Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning.

You have turned my mourning into dancing. You have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy. This is not the killjoy God of popular caricature today who wants to curtail and crush our lives.

[8:51] This is a God who would have us dancing for joy in thanksgiving for God's deliverance daily in our lives. As Christians reading the 30th Psalm, we know that God's deliverance comes through the anointed king we also read of in the book of Psalms.

None other than God's long-promised Messiah, his anointed one, Jesus. Our weeping as Christians comes on the night they laid Jesus dead in the tomb.

Our joy as Christians comes on Easter morning when God raised our Lord from the dead. Our mourning as Christians at our own death is turned into dancing because of our sure and certain hope of resurrection to everlasting life through Jesus Christ, our risen Savior.

And why has God done all this for us? The psalmist tells us why. So that our souls may praise God and not be silent.

This is why we are singing your songs of praise throughout this month. to give voice to your thanks to God. I cannot tell you enough what a blessing it is to be the locum minister in this congregation.

[10:27] Already in a few months I've had the privilege of hearing many of your own stories of God's faithfulness in the storms of life and the straits of fear and the floods of death.

And so when we sing the words of the hymns and songs that you have chosen I know that these are not simply your favorite lyrics and tunes. You have chosen them as personal testimonies to your Savior and strong deliverer in all the seasons of your life.

This is why we join with the psalmist in our songs of praise to the God who has brought us up from the pit of death and restored us to everlasting life.

We cannot remain silent. Not for us. Reliance on the strong mountain of our own strength and prosperity which wither like the autumn leaves.

No. We have something far more steadfast. We have someone far more sure. We have a Savior who stilled the storm.

[11:44] We have a Savior who calms our fears. We have a Savior who has turned our mourning into dancing. Thanks be to God forever.

Amen. Amen.