

Soul At The End of Its Tether

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[0 : 00] Psalm 116 Psalm 116 I was brought low and he saved me.

I want us to think about this today. It is not a new subject to us but one was inclined to pick it up later this week.

The week passed rather. And it is the story of a soul at the end of its resources. Clearly he says the pangs of death surrounded me and the pains of hell laid hold upon me.

I found trouble and sorrow. And it is clear from the language used as we read on there that he was at a loss to know what to do.

He was out of his mind as it were distracted. And the fact of the matter is that ever before David actually penned the words of this psalm, he had been brought into that experience.

[2 : 04] It is out of the experience that he wrote the psalm. It is out of how the Lord taught him that he was able to pen these words that have become a blessing to countless generations of the Lord's people and of earnest seekers of the Lord as well.

And although it does not appear immediately to us in our experience when we are in trouble and distress, it is a wonderful mercy of the Lord that he brings us into difficulties that in turn bring us to an end of ourselves.

It is not something we court, it is not something we go after, but it is something God brings into our experience in order to bring us nearer to him and to show us his mercy.

When he does this, of course, he does it so that he will deal all the more graciously with us. We were talking in the prayer meeting about a young woman in Stornoway who is terminally ill.

And she and her husband had the usual church background but had no interest at all in spiritual things and they lost a child. And they became a little more attentive as a result of that, quite a bit more attentive.

[3 : 34] The man was converted and the woman had been diagnosed with cancer when at the same time she was found to be carrying a child.

And she has since had the child but is now terminally ill. The thing about it and why I am telling this is that in all that, in all that distress, God has used that to bring her husband and herself to faith in Christ.

And she is telling everybody, all her friends, on the phone, so that is all she is able to do, to tell them what Jesus has done. And the point is, at some stage in her experience, she was brought to an end of her resources, brought to which end or end of her tether, however we want to think about it.

And it was in order in God's purpose that he would show his grace and mercy and love and so on. And here in this psalm we are looking at this subject, or the story of a soul at the end of its own resources, and how that God uses this deliberately, constructively, to bring blessing.

And so the Spirit of God would speak to us and lead us to learn from the psalm writer's experience, as others have in the past.

[5 : 10] I want us to think about four things. First of all, I want us to think about where he was. He tells us that in verse 3. He tells us where he was.

In his inner experience, the pains of death surrounded me, and the pangs of Sheol laid hold of me. I found trouble and sorrow.

The bands of death enclosed him. They ensnared him. The picture is the picture of the bird caught in the fowler's snare, trapped, no way out.

And he uses that kind of language to describe his condition. He was in grave danger. Death was almost upon him.

He was but a step from it. Now, we're not actually told specifically the historical connection here. You'll notice there's no little explanation at the beginning.

[6 : 14] We're not even told was it because of a physical illness or was it because of the forces of evil working through his enemies.

Perhaps it was both. But what we do know is that he was seized upon by death. The pains of death surrounded me. The idea there is they seized him.

The pangs of hell seized me. And it's clear that he was in the grip of dread, of terror.

And for sure, the eternal dimension is in his mind's eye. Sometimes, when we read the word, the modern translation now has ditched hell instead and has replaced it with Sheol.

And of course, the truth is that in the Hebrew Bible, the word Sheol can sometimes mean the grave. And sometimes it means, obviously, contextually more than the grave.

[7 : 25] It means where the wicked go when they die. And you have the difference in Psalm 1, right at the beginning of the Psalter.

There is a division, a separation between the godly and the ungodly. You have it in Psalm 9. The wicked shall be cast into hell. The word is Sheol.

But clearly, it's not just the grave, because we're all going to the grave. And so there is a deliberate distinction to be made. And what seized him was the fear and dread of ending up at last in eternal ruin.

And this is not something that we should think is impossible for a believer, a follower of the Lord.

There are plenty of stories recorded, not only in the Bible, but in Christian history, of godly people who were seized upon by this fear of being lost.

That at last, after all, they wouldn't make it into the heavenly kingdom. And so David is gripped like this, and he feels there's no way of escape.

[8 : 43] The pangs of death have surrounded them, encompassed them, and the pangs of Sheol have seized them. I found, he says, trouble and sorrow.

And you find in reading Christian biography that there were people who were like that. They felt, they felt, they felt, towards the end of their life, that they were nothing but hypocrites.

And of course, the enemy uses that. He manipulates, and he pressures, and he persuades. You're just a hypocrite after all. And to be like that is to be seized upon by the pangs of hell.

The fear of ending up there after all. And if you think about it, even in biblical history, there are people who had great promise in their lives.

God honoured them and blessed them. They were recognised as the godly. I'm thinking mainly here about the kings, because they tend to get a lot of the focus. King Uzziah had a long reign, 50 odd years, and yet, towards the end of it, he blundered terribly, and was a leper until the day of his death.

[10 : 07] Hezekiah was going great, and he became proud and exalted, and God brought him down. And his latter days were spent in a far lower spiritual state.

Josiah, good King Josiah we call him, he fell in what we might call the last lap. He went almost crazy to go after Pharaoh Necho, and he battled with them at Carcamish, and he lost, and he died there.

And so, what I'm saying here is, the Lord's people can, when they consider the end of their journey in this world, be seized upon by the fear, not only of death itself, but of ending up in eternity lost.

Those of us who are in the ministry of the world, we have met this again and again, godly old people, and their days are shortening up, and they begin to get afraid that they are going to be exposed as hypocrites, and they'll finish in eternity lost.

One has known them, and ministered to them. So, where he was, is where many of the Lord's people have been in their experience, surrounded by the pains of hell, in his own soul, and seized upon by the pains of hell, and he found trouble and sorrow.

[11 : 53] The fear of judgment, and the possible condemnation, as just another hypocrite. And he tells us that, when death spans find us, we find that grief and trouble invade our soul.

Now, I know that, of course, nowadays, this is not the sort of stuff you get in Christian paperbacks, and a lot of Christian literature. You don't get this, but that doesn't mean it's not biblical.

It is entirely biblical. People take the Christian life far too superficially. They don't take it seriously. They don't reflect sufficiently on death.

They don't reflect on judgment to come, and what it will mean to be there at that great white throne. But we realize here that David was there in his experience perhaps more than once, but certainly he tells us about it here.

And therefore, we need to realize that however much bodily pains afflict us, and they do, no doubt, and maybe fill us with despondency and even terror that they may get worse.

[13:20] They're not to be compared with the terrors of the soul. That's what David is saying. And may then such experience of these terrors of the soul, if we feel them, may they be used by the Lord to lead us to Christ.

The pains of death surrounded me, the pangs of hell seized upon me, I found trouble and sorrow. And you see, that brings us very easily to what he did. Verse 4, Then I called upon the name of the Lord.

He has the knowledge of who God is. God is the covenant-keeping God. He's a God that deals with us in a wonderful way.

He meets our need. I called upon the name of the Lord. Now, there's more to the name of the Lord than just the word Lord, although it's important.

[14:31] Jesus himself is not only entitled to be called Lord, for he is, but he is also the name.

God put his name in Jesus in a unique way. And to call upon the name of the Lord is, from our standpoint, clearly to call upon the Lord Jesus Christ.

And he's encouraging us in this direction. We're to see the Christological significance of this. And we are to entertain the hope of help in calling upon the name of the Lord.

When we don't entertain the hope of help from the Lord by calling upon him, the enemy has got us in a snare. We have no right on this side of death to say there's no point in me calling upon the name of the Lord.

We can't say that. We mustn't say that. Jeremiah was in a pretty hopeless situation.

[15:51] Although he was a prophet of God, if you think about Jeremiah, the evidence was stacked high against him really being a prophet of God.

How could God treat a faithful prophet the way he treated Jeremiah? How could that happen? Well, the answer is we haven't the answer really.

What we have is the evidence that the Lord did call him that he was a prophet, a true prophet, one of the few true prophets of his day.

And therefore, the way God pounded him with trials has to be accepted if not understood. That's the point.

And when God pounds us with trials, it doesn't mean we're not his and it doesn't mean we're not to keep on calling upon him.

[16:53] Quite the opposite. We're to call upon him. David points us in this direction. He tells us where he was and he tells us then, on account of that, what he did.

He called upon the name of the Lord. And we read there in Jeremiah's Lamentations chapter 3 and he says and he lists all those vivid images of misery.

That was his experience. This I recall to my mind then I have hope. Tis of the Lord's mercies we are not consumed.

Because his compassions fail not. Great is thy faithfulness. Some of us were at the Baptist anniversary dinner here yesterday and that was one of the songs they had.

And that's where it came from. That's where it was written from. Great is thy faithfulness. O God my Father there is no shadow of turning with thee. Thou changest not.

[18:05] Thy compassions they fail. Great is thy faithfulness Lord unto me. And we're not to let the stack of problems physical and spiritual we're not to let them so they're sat high we're not to let them make us conclude he doesn't care and he doesn't want us to call upon him.

The reverse is true. David says in the light of all his trouble then this is what I did I called upon the name of the Lord Lord and you see he cried reverently but he cried confidently his whole approach and it was the cry of his soul O Lord O Lord he says save me then I called verse 4 upon the name of the Lord O Lord I implore you deliver my soul the word there is the word we get Yeshua from which is the Hebrew for Jesus the Lord saves and he's saying Lord save me and you see there's no lengthy preamble there's no carefully crafted statements he now don't get me wrong

I'm not saying there's not a place for carefully thought out prayers I'm not saying we shouldn't use a preamble before we get down to making a request known I'm not saying that but what I'm saying is

there are times when all these things have to be put to the side and when we are in distress we cry like this someone has said nothing sharpens the mind and gathers the wandering thoughts better than distress in my distress said the psalm writer in psalm 18 I called on God cried to my God to die and here David is saying I implore you oh Lord save my soul and you and I know no doubt of people who in their distress perhaps who were ungodly in their distress they suddenly found themselves believing that God could save them and they cried out to him once we discover our lost distaste if that's where we are we get serious we use short and to the point and urgent prayers nothing else will do to the

God who saves and that's what David is saying to us this is what to do like a little child urgent for help feeling helpless feeling terrified there's no calm approach there's no sedate approach they just scream help and there's a pointer there to you and me as we address the Lord as we plead for his help and whether it is from our own inner conflicts the spiritual forces working against us that make us feel despairing or whether it is our physical afflictions that make us so weak and helpless at times whatever it is let's do what David did Lord deliver me

I pray I pray we've got a card we used to get a card annually from the late Ernest Lloyd with a scripture text and the last one we got from him is that great text from 2nd Corinthians 12 my grace is sufficient for you for my strength is made perfect in weakness and it's in a corner in the kitchen and quite often always when I need it it will catch my eye I don't generally notice it always when I need it it will catch my eye and that's what we're to remember his grace is sufficient we've got to believe it we've got to take him at his word he is able to save us the grace of

[23 : 10] God is in all its fullness in the Lord Jesus Christ who is the answerer of prayer so this is what he did he cried urgently to the Lord for him that leads us to think thirdly about what he learned regarding the character of God and it's there in the text verse 5 gracious is the Lord and righteous yes our God is merciful three easy subdivisions these are what he learned of the character of God God is gracious and we mustn't ever lose sight of that God deals with us in grace he doesn't deal with us on the basis of us meriting his help he deals with us freely and sovereignly and unconditionally that's what grace is about

Moses said long ago in Exodus 33 19 or rather the Lord said through Moses I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious and we ought never to get beyond that a certain person in our family has a collection of fridge magnets and they're not on the fridge in the manse because although it looks like a stainless steel face it's not metal so the next best thing is the boiler in the utility room and it's plastered with fridge magnets and there's one there of words penned by a man who was on a hopeless case if ever there was one quite often it catches my eye amazing grace how sweet the sound that saved a wretch and he was a wretch of wretches who saved a wretch like me we want never to lose sight of the amazing grace of God to such as we are and you see

David's soul was full of this the Lord is gracious this is what I've learned and I'm passing it on to you he's gracious and we need that grace it's interesting that Paul when he was encouraging the church to give generously to the Lord's work actually uses the Lord Jesus Christ he says 2nd Corinthians and chapter 8 verse 9 you know the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ who being rich for your sake became poor and it's actually obviously the spirit of God is in this and I wouldn't want to take away from that of course but Paul used a really almost cunning way of putting it he's saying to them look here you have had the riches of the grace of God in your salvation

Jesus Christ who was infinitely rich became poor for you that you might be made everlastingly rich so he said get on with your giving to the Lord that's effectively what he's saying the Lord is gracious but he is righteous and this is something that we have to use again and again not only in relation to him although we need that he is righteous he's just in all his ways and he's just in the way he deals with humankind whether people like it or not shall not the judge of all the earth do right said Abram when he was pleading for the cities of the plain he knew he would and however difficult at times it is to understand the justice and the righteousness of God in the way he deals with humankind the fact is he is just the Lord is righteous says the psalm writer this is something else he learned about the character of God in fact he says this in Psalm 119 verse 71 it was good for me that I was afflicted because

I learned your righteous judgments and you see what he's saying here is I was afflicted the pains of death surrounded me the pangs of hell they got hold of me they seized me like a wild animal I was afflicted but it was good for me because I learned your righteous judgments and it's good for you and me when we can come in our experience to say that God and the last thing he says within this

is the Lord is merciful this is important it's important to remember that he says our God is merciful he identifies himself with the people of God and he says our

[29 : 13] God is merciful he is the father of mercies he extends mercy to us we don't deserve it we deserve the opposite but he extends mercy to us and he has made a way for those who are separated from him to return to him he's rich in mercy to all who call upon him in truth yea our God is merciful he says and it is not without notice that long after long long after David wrote these words Paul was writing to Titus Titus 3 verse 4 and he says when the kindness of God our Savior appeared he saved us not because of any righteous acts we have done but in his mercy that's a text to memorize

Titus 3 4 it's a text to memorize when the kindness of our God appeared that's the epiphany that's the coming of Christ he saved us not by any righteous works that we have done but by his mercy and see the psalm writer is telling us all this because he learned out of his distressing experience he learned these things about the character of God he's gracious and righteous and merciful now our time is gone let's finish with one last point what he experienced verse 6 I just want to say this before we finish what he experienced is the taste and see side of the sermon he was kept and restored

I was brought low and he saved me the language in the original is strong I was clean exhausted and dried up like a river bed when the water is gone utterly without resources at the end of my terra and he strengthened me he saved me the saviour's words are opposite here I am a worm and no man despised of the people like water I am poured in and you see the psalm writer in his own experience was like that I was brought low to rock bottom my dear friends although we ought to pray often for those who are at rock bottom through alcohol addiction or drug addiction we can be at rock bottom and be highly respectable on the outside we can be at rock bottom in our own soul it's important to remember that and that is one thing that the psalmist teaches us here this is what he experienced he experienced that from the rock bottom state of his soul he was saved

I was brought low to the very bottom rock bottom and he saved me he brought me down in order to bring me up he ran cries out of me the like of which I never thought I would cry but he did it in order to bring me up I don't know how often we have been able to identify with the taste and see side of the words this poor man cried and the Lord heard him and saved him from his distress but it's all about taste and see if you're there this is what to do this is what you have to do and it is helpful therefore for us to take to heart the taste and see sight what he experienced because he wants to pass it on to us and whether we're in the faith and have wandered away or we've slipped back or whether we've yet to lay hold of

Christ the word is the same for us we are to implore him save my soul whether we're beset by fears of our physical health deterioration or our soul being cast away at last we're to take these words and pray them to him call upon him I beseech you O Lord save my soul and save it on account of what you are gracious and righteous and merciful and may we hear him say to us this very day fear not for I am with you be not dismayed for I am your God yea I will strengthen you

[35 : 14] I will uphold you with my righteous right hand and John takes us into the heavenly room and he says that the father's right hand is our advocate with him Jesus Christ the righteous one Amen we sing together then in Psalm 31