

My Cares, God's Comforts

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- [0 : 0 0] And turn with me this morning to Psalm 94 and verse 19. Psalm 94 and verse 19.
- When the cares of my heart are many, your consolations cheer my soul. I don't like giving away my email address, but on this occasion to buy new Bible software, I had to provide my email address to a Christian organization called Crosswalk.
- Soon after, I began to receive a daily email from Crosswalk. For the first few weeks, I didn't look at any of them. I just put them straight into my junk folder.
- But recently, in a spare moment, I read one or two of them. And now I'm hooked. Every day I look forward to receiving my email from Crosswalk.
- Let me read you a couple of the titles of their emails. Ten ways the Psalms lead us into deeper worship. Seven promises of God for when the storms of life hit.
- [1 : 1 5] But the daily email which had the most impact upon me was one I received from Crosswalk on Wednesday the 16th of September. Entitled, Ten Verses About Fear and Anxiety to Remind Us That God Is in Control.
- Ten verses about fear and anxiety to remind us that God is in control. So the list started with Isaiah 41 verse 10.
- The verse we considered last week at our morning service on the National Day of Prayer. Third on the list was Psalm 94 verse 19.
- When the cares of my heart are many, your consolations cheer my soul. Well, like being given spiritual steroids, each of these verses Crosswalk quoted concerning fear and anxiety to remind us that God is in control, strengthened my weak knees and lifted up my drooping arms.
- And so over the next couple of Sunday mornings, I want to share some of them with you. I'm doing this because although I believe that anxiety, fear and loneliness were significant problems before the 2020 coronavirus pandemic, they have now reached epidemic proportions.
- [2 : 4 7] In fact, I wonder whether the greatest pandemic in the world today isn't a bat virus, but the problems of anxiety, fear and loneliness.
- Economists tell us it will take generations to pay off the costs of the government's lockdown furlough scheme. It will take even longer for the mental health impact of COVID-19 to be fully understood and overcome.
- Even those of us who are fortunate enough to shrug our shoulders and say, well, let's get on with life through this crazy year, we will have been impacted far more than we think. It's been a difficult year, but it's also been a year of tremendous opportunity for us as Christians.
- Opportunity to know how faithful, trustworthy and reliable our loving Heavenly Father is, how much He loves us, and how Jesus is all we need when Jesus is all we have.
- As I said, third on the list of verses from Crosswalk was this verse, Psalm 94, 19, When the cares of my heart are many, your consolations cheer my soul.

[4 : 08] Now, the writer of the Psalm lived in difficult days. Whoever he was, the text doesn't tell us, he endured much at the hands of very wicked people. Far from being ashamed of themselves, these wicked people were jubilant.

They rejoiced in their wickedness, and they loved to cause the righteous pain. In the face of such violence and malevolence, the writer of this Psalm does not fight fire with fire.

He does not take matters into his own hands. Rather, he commits the situation to his God, and he leaves it for God to deal with. He knows he can't change those wicked people, but he knows that God can change those wicked people, and so he commits them to his Heavenly Father.

For those of you who log into our morning devotions, you'll know that every morning, I pray this prayer. The more I think about it, the more I think I agree with it, it's the prayer of the Reformed theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr.

God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I can't change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference. Well, the psalmist can't change how these wicked people treat him, but he can change the way they make him feel.

[5 : 38] And so, as well as handing over their judgment into the hands of God, the psalmist hands over the way they make him feel to God.

It takes courage to open oneself up and tell God everything about how hurt we are and how fragile we are. Well, it's in this context, the context of the fear, anxiety, and loneliness of the believer, that the psalmist has the courage to turn over his cares to God.

For it's only there that he'll find the so-called consolations of God and his soul shall be cheered. He gives God his distressing cares and in return, God gives him his delightful comforts.

So what I want to do this morning, for a short while, is to draw Psalm 94, 19 into our present-day experience. To lead us in giving our cares over to God and in return receiving his comforts.

And to do this, I want to consider two things, my cares and God's comforts. My cares and God's comforts.

[7 : 03] My cares, first of all, when the cares of my heart are many, your consolations cheer my soul. And the implication is clear for us.

For us, experiencing many cares for the believer is not a case of if, but when. Comedian quipped last century that our two certainties in life, death and taxes.

Well, actually, according to the psalmist, there's another. Many cares. When we are passing through times of anxiety, fear, and loneliness, we need to understand, it is entirely normal for us to pass through these times.

Remember the words of Peter in 1 Peter 4, 12 and 13, Do not be surprised at the fiery trial which comes upon you to test you as though something strange were happening to you.

But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you also may rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. When?

[8 : 17] If it wasn't coronavirus, it would be something else which caused us to be fearful and anxious. The wind would cause the curtains to shake in a strange way and our hearts would miss a beat thinking that there was an intruder in the house.

When? The cares come. Not if. You'll notice also that the psalmist talks about cares. Care.

The Hebrew word behind this is very rare indeed and as far as it can be translated into English, it means anxious thoughts. In Job 4, 13, it's used in the context of nightmares.

Job says, Amid thoughts from visions of the night when deep sleep falls on men, dread came upon me and trembling which made all my bones shake.

Job 20, 20. And 2, it's used of a man's response to hearing himself being insulted. My troubled thoughts prompt me to answer because I'm greatly disturbed.

[9 : 28] I hear a buke that dishonors me. And then perhaps its most famous use in Psalm 139, verse 23. Search me, O God, and know my heart.

Test me and know my anxious thoughts, my cares. I think we get the general idea. These are unsettling, anxious, disquieting thoughts.

They are worries. They are cares. They are angsts. The psalmist doesn't define what they are for us. We can guess by mirror reading the rest of the psalm, but we are thankful that the Holy Spirit has left that definition open because it means that whatever your own personal fears, anxieties, and worries are today, you can fit them into this verse.

What are these cares? They are unsettling, anxious, and disquieting thoughts. You can't see them because, as the psalmist says, they belong to the regions of the heart.

But unseen by others, these cares gnaw away at you, rather like a beaver, perhaps, gnawing at the base of a massive tree until it falls to the ground.

[10 : 53] that in our minds, in our hearts, these cares are internal and are unseen by others. You may look at the picture of health and happiness to everyone around you, but inside, your heart is shaking like a leaf.

The cares of your heart are many. But then you'll notice from the text that they're the cares of my heart.

When the cares of my heart in other words, they're individual cares particular to each and every believing individual.

What causes you anxiety may not cause me anxiety. What makes me afraid may not make you afraid. Not all of us are strong all of the time.

We all have our particular cares. And so someone comes to me and they might tell me of a particular fear they have. And although I sympathize with them, I really do, secretly I wonder, how can you be afraid of something so inconsequential?

[12 : 04] And at other times, I watch someone bearing with and winning through a struggle which would floor me. And I secretly wonder, where do you get the strength to be so brave?

You see, my mind and heart are different from yours and yours from mine. We each have our own particular cares. We must be careful never to minimize those cares unique to each of us as individual believers.

but then notice also from the text that the cares of my heart are many. They are cares, not just care, but cares. It's not just one here and one there from time to time, but many cares all of the time.

We feel rather like that camel on whose breaking back has been placed just one too many straws. We were fearful, anxious, and lonely before we ever heard the words COVID-19, lockdown, and social distancing.

Now we're just plain overloaded. Turn to the right, there's something to worry about. Turn to the left, and there's something to worry about. We turn above, we turn below, we turn behind, we turn ahead.

[13 : 28] There's always another care in our hearts. Am I connecting with anyone here except myself? I suspect I'm connecting with many more of you than are willing to admit it publicly.

The dream of many men my age is to go off for a year by themselves to the Alaskan wilderness. I want to build my own log cabin.

I want to hunt my own food. I want to learn about different kinds of snow, and somehow I want to be able to find myself in the whole experience.

You know, 2020 has been an Alaskan year for all of us, a year of self-discovery. We've learned that we ain't nearly as strong or self-sufficient as we thought we were, and that the cares of our hearts are many.

It's okay to admit it because, you see, if you have no cares in your heart, then the comfort of the gospel will not cheer your soul.

[14 : 39] God's strength is for those who know they're weak. God's mercy is for those who know they're sinners. God's grace is for those who know they are helpless. One final thing before we move on, and it's simply this.

You are not alone in having many cares in your heart. You might think, I'm the only Christian to ever have been as anxious as I am.

You're not. In fact, you're in a very select group called the self-aware. Let me assure you that even though you may feel you are, you are not alone in your cave.

But there are even today, here in Glasgow City Free Church, many who are there with you. And even if it wasn't, there was one who was there and his name is Jesus Christ of Nazareth and he's with you there today.

My cares. Secondly, God's consolations, God's consolations. One of the reasons why perhaps this verse in Psalm 94, 19 is not more commonly used is because of the word consolations.

[16 : 00] It's not a word we often use, but it's a beautiful word. I guess if you wanted to find another word for it, you could loosely talk of comforts. The Greek translators of the Old Testament translated it with the Greek word encouragement, paraklesis.

And yet, in most English translations, the word consolation is still used. The majority of its uses of the Old Testament concern the consolation of grief.

For example, in Genesis 24, 67, we read, Isaac was comforted or consoled after his mother's death. There are, however, other occasions where the word is used with which we may be more familiar.

For example, in Psalm 23, verse 4, words we'll look at next week, words we know of by heart and often by experience we read, even when I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for you are with me, your rod and your staff.

They console me. They comfort me. God's presence with us is our consolation when we're passing through dangerous and difficult times in life.

[17 : 17] Again, in Isaiah 40, verse 1, the prophet cries to the people of God, consolation, consolation, my people, says your God. Translated, comfort, comfort, my people, says your God.

God calls his prophet to preach consolation to a people whose hearts are filled with many anxieties, fears, and cares. Many years ago, I sat beside one of our older members.

She used to sit where Helen, Scotty, and Ruthie are sitting today. She passed from this life to the next. She was weak.

She was wearing an oxygen mask and her words weren't awful clear. I wanted to try and take her mind away from her breathing struggles for a moment and help her think about something very different.

So I asked her what she thought the role of a minister should be. she took off her oxygen mask and in barely more than a whisper, she said, Colin, preach comfort.

[18 : 32] Preach comfort. Marianne Martin was such a wise Christian lady. And it was a privilege to learn from her that almost the entire role of the ministry is concerned with the proclamation of the comforts of the gospel.

Many years before that, my mentor, Professor Dolan McLeod, who will be preaching here later this month, said the same thing in one of his classes at the Free Church College. Having lectured on one of the Scottish church fathers, I can't recall who it was, he ended his class by applying the lesson into our everyday ministry.

I wouldn't presume to quote the master verbatim, but I vividly remember him saying to us, your people will have had hard weeks.

They've got worries about their work, about their health, about their families. The last thing they need to hear from you on a Lord's Day is bad news.

Do not condemn your people in all your preaching. Comfort them with the promises of the gospel. Among all the lessons I learned in Free Church College, perhaps that was the most important of them all.

[19 : 52] Because all of us here have our hearts weighed down by many cares. We need the comforts and consolations of the gospel, for these will cheer the soul rather than weigh it down even further.

I rather think that another reason our fathers didn't really often use this wonderful verse in Psalm 94 verse 19 is because the word consolation is most often used in the Old Testament in a feminine sense.

So in Isaiah 66 God is comforting his people and in verse 11 concerning the rebuilding of the city of Jerusalem God promises them saying you will nurse and be satisfied at her comforting breasts.

You will drink deeply and delight in her overflowing abundance. And the image here is of a young child being comforted by her mother's breasts.

For whatever reason she's crying and her mother comforts her by drawing up close and letting her feet. That's the picture. It's the closest of all bonds the comfort a crying child receives from her loving mother.

[21 : 12] The rawness, the humanness, and the intimacy of the image. She cannot find comfort anywhere else, not in money, not in pleasure.

What that baby needs is for her mother to hold her close so that their heartbeats can intertwine in one rhythmic melody. The mother's heartbeat is slow and measured.

And that heartbeat calms her child's fast and erratic heartbeat until finally they beat together as one and the child is at peace in her mother's arms and at her mother's breast.

It's such a beautiful image. It's so poignant and one with which I'm sure we can all identify. And this is who God is for us.

Perhaps it's a very different image of God from the one which you're used to, a nursing mother. And yet this is what the consolations of God, it seems to me, mean at base level.

[22 : 21] That our hearts are weighed down by many cares, anxiety levels are through the roof, and we're alarmed at the noise of a leaf falling from a tree. We are fearful, and we are lonely, and God embraces us, and he draws us close to him so that we may hear his heartbeat and feel the comforting rhythm of his love for us.

And as he holds us close, our heartbeat tunes in with his until the infinite blessedness and eternal composure of God becomes ours too.

how marvelous an image, the great consolations of God, the comforts of the gospel, the paraklesis of our heavenly Father.

And as he holds us close, he soothingly whispers into our ears, I have loved you with an everlasting love. I will never leave you nor forsake you.

Nothing shall separate you from the love I have for you in Christ Jesus. I have forgiven all your sin. I did not spare my own son, but I gave him up for you.

[23 : 35] I will surely graciously give you all things. Do not worry about what you will eat or what you will drink, for I am your heavenly Father, and I know you need these things.

Before you call, I will answer. Cast all your cares upon me, because I care for you. These and a thousand other gospel promises God soothingly whispers into our ears and fills our hearts.

These are the consolations of God. These are the loving promises of the gospel. His heartbeat of love measured to us not in proportion to our need, but in proportion to his infinite generosity and his eternal abundance.

And he calls to us. You may be anxious and you may be crying like an anxious child.

I hold out my arms to you to draw you close to myself. When your cares of your heart are many, my comforts will cheer your soul.

[24 : 52] He will hold us close. We shall hear the beat of his loving heart, each beat calling out, my precious daughter, I love you.

Well, the consolations of God, according to the psalmist, cheer his soul. The word cheer here is the right translation, but it carries along with it the idea of delight and rejoice.

And they delight my soul, incredible though it is. Although our hearts may be weighed down by many cares, yet the consolations of the gospel bring delight to our souls.

That simultaneously the believer can both be weighed down and also lifted up. The believer can be deflated but also delighted. The many cares of my heart drive me to the heart of my heavenly father, and there in his loving embrace I find delight.

That's what the psalmist is saying. Delight. Isn't that where we'd rather be than dirge? Cheer. Isn't that what we'd rather be than care?

[26 : 02] Joy. Isn't that what we would rather instead of dejection? These gospel promises go deeper than the human heart. They penetrate down into the human soul.

They're centered of everything we are as human beings in the sight of God. Just like the blood of Christ claims deeper than sin can stain us so the comforts of the gospel delight deeper than our cares can weigh us down.

I'm not for one second belittling any of the cares of our hearts, but I am elevating the power of the gospel to deal with them. We're fearful.

The gospel tells us that we're God's beloved children. We're anxious. The gospel assures us that our heavenly father cares for us. We're lonely, but the gospel holds us so close to God that we can hear his loving heartbeat and his soothing voice.

Earlier on, I called this verse a spiritual steroid. I don't back down for one second. When the cares of my heart are many, your consolations cheer my soul. Crosswalk quoted this verse concerning fear and anxiety to remind us that God is in control.

[27 : 17] Its impact was to strengthen my weak knees and to lift up my drooping arms. Coronavirus may be utmost in your list of cares right now, but the gospel of Jesus Christ can help you cope whatever the outcome.

The late David Ford once said something in a sermon which I will never forget. He stood here as he said these words. He said, preaching on the book of Jonah, faith is the key that opens the promises of God.

Faith is the key that opens the promises of God. Faith in Christ is the key that opens the promises of Psalm 94 verse 19.

All things are possible to the one who believes in Christ. Yes, even though she may be weighed down by many cares, she also can be delighted in the gospel comforts of her Savior.

Let us pray. Lord, many of us know our Bibles from back to front, front to back, upwards, downwards, side to side.

[28 : 36] And yet there are verses of Scripture which jump out at us, hit us straight between the eyes and speak straight into our hearts, and this is one of them. We've probably read this verse a hundred times before.

And yet, how powerful a thing it is to know that you, our loving Heavenly Father, hold us so close to yourself. That when our cares and fears and anxieties are so elevated that we are toxic to be around, that we take out our frustrations on those we love the most, yet you hold us close to your heart and you say, I love you, my dear son.

Give us faith in you, O Lord, we ask. For any who are here in the building today or zooming in from home, we ask that you would give us faith to open your promises.

We ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen.