

Vain is the salvation of man

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[0 : 0 0] Morning everyone. If you could be turning in your Bibles to page 609. 609, we're going to be reading Psalm 108.

A song, a psalm of David. My heart is steadfast, O God. I will sing and make melody with all my being.

Awake, O harp and lyre. I will awake the dawn. I will give thanks to you, O Lord, among the peoples. I will sing praises to you among the nations. For your steadfast love is great above the heavens.

Your faithfulness reaches to the clouds. Be exalted, O God, above the heavens. Let your glory be over all the earth, that your beloved ones may be delivered.

Give salvation by your right hand and answer me. God has promised in his holiness. With exultation I will divide up Shechem and portion out the valley of Succoth.

[1 : 1 3] Gilead is mine. Manasseh is mine. Ephraim is my helmet. Judah my scepter. Moab is my washbasin.

Upon Edom I cast my shoe. Over Philistia I shout in triumph. Who will bring me to the fortified city?

Who will lead me to Edom? Have you not rejected us, O God? You do not go out, O God, with our armies. O grant us help against the foe.

For vain is the salvation of man. With God we shall do valiantly. It is he who will tread down our foes. Morning everyone.

Shall we quickly pray again? Heavenly Father, we thank you so much for the goodness of your word. And we pray, Lord, now that you would open our eyes, soften our hearts, remove any hard-heartedness that might prevent us from hearing your word this morning.

[2 : 1 8] And we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Well, if that was your first time reading Psalm 108, I wonder if the ending caught you off guard as much as it did me.

It started out so promising, didn't it? In fact, more than that, it seemed triumphant all the way until the end. Even verse 10 asked two questions that wouldn't be out of place in a pre-match team talk. Who will bring me to the fortified city?

Who will lead me to Edom? And with one voice, you'd think the team, or maybe the army in this case, would all shout in unison, You will, God! Yeah! You will lead us to Edom! Ah! And then it all burst out the change rooms and go and tackle this city called Edom.

But verse 11 really puts a dampener on the excitement. Verse 11, Have you not rejected us, O God? You do not go out, O God, with our armies. God is missing.

Where is he? If you're familiar with the Old Testament, then you'll know stories where God leads his people out in battle and conquers the enemy despite ridiculous odds. But not this time.

[3 : 2 2] You do not go out, O God, with our armies. Where is God? He is not here. And yet our first instincts weren't wrong.

Actually, this is a triumphant psalm. Really triumphant. It is designed to help the believer to keep trusting God, even when it looks like God is long gone. We'll unpack that more later, but for now, suffice to say that our subject this morning is this.

Trusting that God will crush our enemies, even when it looks like he is long gone. Trusting that God will crush our enemies, even when it looks like he is long gone. And the implications of that trust will be joy in the Lord, and a shunning of the temporary salvation that humans can offer.

I don't know how you're feeling this morning in relation to the Lord. Perhaps you do feel close to him. Praise God. And long may that continue. But maybe he feels distant. There are many reasons we could feel like that, either now or in the future.

Grief. A patch of spiritual dryness. I, myself, am an absolute creature of habit. But I'm also a teacher, so I've got a lot of time off without routine. And so I find, personally, holidays, I find it more difficult to draw near to God.

[4 : 32] It could be the general mundane clockwork of life. Day by day goes by, and still the Lord has not returned. How long are we expected to wait? Perhaps you're just visiting us today, and you wouldn't call yourself a Christian.

You are very, very welcome here. I imagine to you, God feels very far off. A couple of weekends ago, my wife and I were at my little sister's wedding, and we got chatting to one of my dad's old school friends about Christianity.

And he took issue with the fact that Christianity asks people to believe in God based on evidence 2,000 years old. And he said he wanted something a little more relevant, more up close, less far off.

And maybe that's you today as well. Well, wherever we are on that spectrum, there is one amazing truth that we can all take away from this psalm, and no matter how far or close God feels. And if you like to take notes as you listen, then you may like to write this at the top of your page.

And I think even if you note nothing else down today, this is a claim, I think you will still have enough to rejoice on throughout the coming week. And the truth is this. If all you have is a promise from God, you have everything you need.

[5 : 41] If all you have is a promise from God, you have everything you need. See, if we believe that here this morning, then like the psalmist who put these psalms together, it will affect us in a number of ways.

But chiefly here, it will affect our joy. And that's our first point. Rejoice in the Lord's faithfulness. I apologize for the lack of headings on your handouts.

I didn't have this ready six weeks ago. Rejoice in the Lord's faithfulness. You'll see in verse 7 that God has made a promise. God has promised in his holiness.

But before we dig into what that promise is, we're going to look at the psalmist's response to that promise. So have a look down with me at verses 1 to 4. Now more often, when someone makes a huge promise, our feeling isn't one of unbridled delight, but more one of skepticism.

We've recently had a general election, and a new party's been installed. And now we're just waiting to see if they will honor their promises or not. I don't know if you read any of the party's manifestos, but they are pages and pages of promises.

[7 : 10] And even if they fulfilled most of them, can they really do all of them? And in the way that they led us to believe that they would? Or what about the skeptic of Christianity? When told that the Bible promises Jesus' return, promises a day of judgment, a day of justice, is that met with belief, let alone joy?

More often, a scoff or a shrug. Skepticism. Actually, in some ways, the psalmist's joy is almost childlike. And for a child, the promise of Christmas morning is untainted.

Of course, Santa will have left presents under the tree. Of course, there will be presents at the end of my bed. And with the unshakable confidence comes an untameable joy. And I'm sure many parents in this room will know what comes with such joy.

And they will awake the dawn. This is the excitement of the psalmist. The joy he derives from God's promise. An innocent joy and an untainted joy. All in response to a promise.

And notice how unashamed it is. Now, how unapologetic he is. His joy is public. I will give thanks to you, O Lord, among the peoples. I will sing praises to you among the nations.

[8 : 18] Because we're British, such public joy is sometimes a bit weird to us. If we see someone that happy in public, the cynical part of us, not every part of us, but the cynical part of God goes, what are you so happy about? As if being that happy is almost wrong.

And so as people, we can sometimes be a bit ashamed of being this happy. Let alone about, sorry, let alone this happy about a God who no one else can see. But this kind of joy is okay.

It is right, even. The psalmist also knew God wasn't with him physically. If you read the next psalm, you would see that this psalmist knows suffering because of his faith in the Lord. And yet, because he has a promise from God, he can still take on this childlike joy.

What does this mean, then? It doesn't mean that we have to go around smiling from ear to ear until our faces ache, though we could. Actually, chiefly for the psalmist, this confidence and joy works its way out in song.

And if you realize that, verse one, my heart is steadfast, God. I will sing and make melody. Verse two, awake, O harp and lyre. Verse three, I will sing praises to you among the nations.

[9 : 24] As we gather here on Sunday mornings, as people with steadfast hearts, no matter how big or small we are in number, it is right that we sing together. We have a promise from God, so we can joyfully sing.

And throughout my life, I've spent a fair bit of time in compulsory chapel. Maybe a couple of us younger ones have here as well. I had to go to chapel every week as a schoolboy, and now I go as a member of staff at Eltham College.

And in both cases, I don't know about you, Rory, but I would describe chapel as a place where music goes to die. It is not cool to sing in chapel in the schools that I've experienced, but what's changed for me between being a schoolboy and a teacher is a faith in Jesus.

Now that I'm a Christian singing in chapel, I make it my goal to sing loud and proud, even when few of the kids around me are. Why? Because I know that we have a God who is faithful, and that is cause to rejoice and sing amongst the nations.

And yes, life trusting Jesus can be difficult. It is hard when we can't see God. We ache for faith to turn into sight. But even in the midst of that, because we have a promise from God, we can have a profound joy in the Lord, and we can sing of that joy.

[10 : 37] At church, at home, car journeys, a carol service in the workplace, dare I say, even chapel. Joyful singing is a right response to the Lord's faithfulness.

But even if we're slightly conscious about our singing voices, we can still speak of God's faithfulness to each other when we meet up. Any way, really, in which our joy can be made public is a right response to God's faithfulness.

I'm aware that we may have heard the idea of joy and thanksgiving lots over the course of Psalm 107. I hope we don't feel bopped on the head by it. This isn't a command to be joyful, more a constant reminder that this is our joy.

This joy is yours. If you have a promise from God, which we do, then we have everything we need. We can own this joy, which I think is so helpful when we're tempted to doubt because of God's absence.

And one of the greatest things about Christianity is that our futures do not rest on what we feel now. Emotions chop and change, but the Lord is unchanging, as are his promises.

[11 : 40] Verse 4 again, Your steadfast love is great above the heavens. Your faithfulness reaches to the clouds. Rejoice in his faithfulness unashamedly and unapologetically.

Well, what then is the promise? What is the Lord faithful to? What will help us feel this confidence and joy even when God seems distant? It's point two. Rejoice in the Lord's faithfulness because he will crush our enemies.

He will crush our enemies. Actually, we might think that's a bit distasteful, actually. A bit violent, a bit of an overreaction, not immediately cause for joy. If those are your thoughts, then just put them on hold for a second and read the next few verses with me.

Let's read verses 5 to 9. Be exalted, O God, above the heavens. Let your glory be over all the earth. Let your beloved ones may be delivered.

Give salvation by your right hand and answer me. God has promised in his holiness. With exaltation, I will divide up Shechem and portion out the bully of Sukkoth. Gilead is mine.

[12 : 50] Manasseh is mine. Ephraim is my helmet. Judah my scepter. Moab is my washbasin. Upon Edom, I cast my shoe. Over Philistia, I shout in triumph. Now, verse 7 contains that word holiness.

That means God's total set-apart perfection. He promises in his perfection. And then he goes on to list nine different places which sort of map out the land of Israel and some of her greatest enemies.

And I imagine to an Israelite, this would conjure up a really stark geographical picture. Their whole land and her enemies. And the message is clear. God will visibly rule over all of them.

He will divide up Shechem. He will portion out the valley of Sukkoth. And he decides who gets what. It's like someone handing out food to a line of refugees. But more than that, God's people will hold the places of honor and rule.

And their enemies will be crushed. Verse 8. Ephraim is my helmet. Judah my scepter. It is the picture of a conquering king. And God's people will adorn the most honored positions on God's armor.

[13 : 58] His kingly outfit. They will sit on his head. They will be the official symbol of his kingship, his sovereignty. They will be his scepter. But the enemies of God's people, Moab, Edom, Philistia, the ones who have caused so much havoc and distress throughout the centuries, they will come to nothing.

A wash basin. A doormat. A carcass. God will crush our enemies. But does this idea of crushed enemies immediately bring us joy?

It should. Let's remember what this meant for the first people who heard this promise. They lived in a warring and plundering society. Tribes would raid neighboring tribes just to secure their own existence or swell their own power.

And the tribe of Israel weren't unfamiliar with war. When God went out before them, they had outrageous victories. But they also knew defeat as well. They would have known war and defeat with all of these enemies.

Some of them unprovoked. The Moabites, the Edomites, the Philistines. If you had said to an Israelite back then, would you like everlasting peace where there is no more anxiety? No more looking at the horizon to see what's coming.

[15 : 06] No more suffering at the hands of enemies. No more death. I can crush your enemies. Which one of them would have said no? To them, that would have meant uninterrupted peace.

And actually, if you said to a Ukrainian soldier right now, I can crush the enemy and there will be instant peace, you can decide exactly who that enemy is and how far it extends. Which of them would choose to let the war rage on without any hope of an end?

To crush the enemy means uninterrupted peace. There is no more enemy left to cause an uprising. And whilst we are very lucky and we're not at war just yet, we still have enemies.

They're not new to us. We've heard them before. Insecurity, geographical, financial, relational, sickness, family strife, grief, even a sense of missing purpose. Those who are hostile to Jesus, ultimately death.

That's where Paul goes in the New Testament. Which one of them would we not like to see crushed by the sinner saved by grace? I would love never to go to war. I would love to never feel anxious again.

[16 : 09] I would love never to feel grief. I would love never to see my wife die. Those who say they would rather keep those things because that's what makes life special, have no idea how good the peace is that God offers.

In his holiness, in his perfection, God promises that he will establish his glory over the whole earth and crush our enemies. Sickness gone. Suffering gone.

Loneliness gone. Mockers gone. Persecutors gone. Death gone. God's people will hold the places of honor no longer mocked, no longer pitied, no longer even slightly embarrassed.

Honored. That is reason to rejoice unashamedly and unapologetically, even when things seem so distant now. God has promised in his perfection that all our enemies will be crushed.

How do we feel about that now? Perhaps more joyful. But perhaps there is still an annoying snag for us, a thorn in our side, something that won't quite let us feel this joy. Life just isn't like that now, is it?

[17 : 18] Not that Jesus said it would be. He said there would be a difficult period of waiting. But what we see before us can be much more tempting to believe in than what we can't see. We can see grief.

We can see sickness. We do feel embarrassment. We can see war. We can see death. But we can't see God. And so our joy is limited by our faith.

Well, our final point, I think should take us even further into knowing the steadfast joy that comes from a trust in the Lord. Point three, God will crush our enemies even when it seems like God is long gone.

Even when it seems like God is long gone. Let's read again from verse six. That your beloved ones may be delivered. Give salvation by your right hand and answer me. God has promised in his holiness.

With exaltation, I will divide up Shechem and portion out the value of Sukkoth. Gilead is mine. Manasseh is mine. Ephraim is my helmet. Judah my scepter. Moab is my wash basin. Upon Eden, I cast my shoe over Philistia.

[18 : 20] I shout in triumph. Who then will bring me to the fortified city? Who will lead me to Eden? Have you not rejected us, O God? You do not go out, O God, with our armies.

O grant us help against the foe, for vain is the salvation of man. With God we shall do valiantly. It is he who will tread down our foes. Now here is where we answer the question of why is the psalmist so confident and joyful whilst also acknowledging that God is absent.

And so I'll answer that question. We're going to turn back to Psalm 60 in a minute. As we do so, I want you to try and think, why have we gone there? I don't think it will be too hard. I'm going to give you 20 seconds to have a read of Psalm 60. Keep a finger in Psalm 8.

Psalm 60 is on page 574. You've got 20 seconds. Have a read of Psalm 60. 20 seconds. Okay.

Now as a teacher, I have two obvious questions. Is it plagiarism if you copy yourself word for word? The answer to that is yes, actually. And does the psalmist have a word count that he's struggling to reach?

[19 : 32] But on reflection, I think it's more than that. And I think this repetition actually is totally perfect here. See, the psalmist is reminding himself, reminding his reader that if all you have from God is a promise, you have everything you need.

Everything you need to trust, to be joyful, to shun the salvation of man. Let me explain. Imagine two Israelites. They live in the time between Israel's return from exile, they've come back from Babylon to Jerusalem, and the coming of Jesus.

One is called Ishmael, the other is Monty. And one day Monty comes up to Ishmael and says, Ishmael, why do you look so down? Ishmael replies, Do you ever doubt God's promises?

I think I do. This new Jerusalem that we've come back to, it's a bit pathetic really. Nothing like the one my granny told me stories about when King David and Solomon were ruling.

And where is God anyway? Have you seen him lately? Anyway, why are you so happy? And Monty goes, Oh, Ishmael, have you not read Psalm 108? They recall some words from an older psalm, actually, Psalm 60, if you didn't know.

[20 : 43] And in Psalm 60, David found himself in much a similar position. He had a promise from God that God would establish his glory over the whole earth, he would crush their enemies, but no God.

It seemed like God had abandoned them. It seemed hopeless, really. God was nowhere to be seen. Ishmael cuts in, Yeah, and look where it got us, Monty. Both Israel and Judah have been decimated. We were sent into exile, so I'll ask you again, why are you so happy?

Monty looks lovingly back at Ishmael and says, Because look at where we are now, Ishmael. We're back in Jerusalem. I know we've been to hell and back. We've been exiled.

We've been in the pits of despair. But who do you think brought us back here? Because it definitely wasn't our doing. God may have seemed absent, but he definitely hasn't abandoned us.

The hope of his promise is still very much alive, and he's proven it. He brought us back home. Now, Monty isn't naive. He's not an idiot.

[21 : 47] As he looks at the Jerusalem that he's returned to, he knows this can't be the full and final fulfillment of God's promise. Judah is not the scepter yet. Moab is not a washbasin. Philistia is not yet a carcass. But there is enough proof there to know for certain that however absent or distant God seems, he is faithful to his promise.

God's people went to exile and back, just as God said they would. And so as the psalmist repeats these words from Psalm 60, he's basically saying, Hey, do you remember that time when things looked bleak?

When it looked like God was gone? When the promise of a kingdom looked totally unrealistic? Well, look at us now. We're still here. We're still standing, all by the strength of God.

And this promise, it's going to happen fully and totally. God's glory will be established over the whole earth. Just keep trusting. It may look weak now.

I know we're still waiting, says the psalmist. God may not be here. But this time, this time, I will wait with total confidence and unbridled joy.

[22 : 52] Because if all you have from God is a promise, like David did back then, then you have everything you need. So they can keep looking forward to the day when God really will trample over all of his enemies, even if he does seem absent now.

And so it's clear to see how this psalm is trying to encourage us. We live in a time 2,000 years after the Lord last set foot in this world. There are times, or there will be times, when we feel distant from him.

When it seems like he is no longer there. Our enemies still crowd around. Should we despair? No. If all we have from God is a promise, then we have everything we need.

And boy, do we have a promise. If you want a more relatable, slightly updated summary of God's final promise to us, go home and read Revelation 21 and 22. And I hope that drives us to a lifelong joy and steadfastness in the Lord.

Rejoice in the Lord's faithfulness because he will crush our enemies even when he seems long gone. As we join into a close then, let's briefly think about some implications for us.

[24 : 00] And firstly, despite what we can or cannot see around us, we can say with the psalmist, my heart is steadfast, O God. We can trust that God will spread his glory over the whole earth.

Enemies crushed, Christians raised in honour. We can wait patiently, and we can wait joyfully. As we've already spoken a fair bit about joy, we'll move on to one final implication I think this psalm steers us towards.

And it is the title, official title, on your handout. And it's the flip side of waiting patiently for God's salvation. It's there in verse 12 of Psalm 108, which if you've lost it, is on page 610.

Verse 12, vain is the salvation of man. It is an important thing to know, especially when the salvation of God is something we can't see yet.

You see, if we doubt God's salvation because we cannot see him, then it's entirely possible we'll put our trust in what we can see, the salvation of man. I think in the psalm, the salvation of man looks like conquering enemy armies without God.

[25 : 06] Now, as you said, we have different enemies, but they are no less real. Insecurity, the financial relational, geographical stuff, sickness, strife, grief, the missing purpose, death, those who are hostile to the Lord Jesus.

And I think the salvation of man, in our case, looks like a self-sufficiency that we heard about a couple of weeks ago. The idea that we can conquer these issues without God and gain peace on our own.

Yes, there are necessary steps that we must take, but they're never the final solution, unbeatable forever. You can work endless hours to gain financial security, but is it guaranteed? One investment might go south.

The markets might plummet. You might have an unforeseen cost come along. My wife and I have had enough of them in the past year. What do you do when you complete your life's goal? Find a new one and complete that too?

And then what? Or we could subtly change our lives to look more and more like those around us. Do what we can to fit in and escape the sacrifices that come with being a Christian. And jeopardize what?

[26 : 04] An eternity with the Lord and all his goodness? Not worth it. And of course, we're still waiting on a human solution that will cheat death forever. Vain is the salvation of man.

Not that the Lord promises to fix all those things now, though he could, but he will when the Lord Jesus returns and takes us to spend an eternity with him where all his enemies are crushed, treasure where moth, rust, and thief cannot destroy, and an eternal purpose to serve the living God.

It can be hard to keep our eyes pinned on that when God isn't here, can't it? But hear this psalm. If you have a promise from God, you have everything you need.

And we have a promise from God. As I said, go and read Revelation 21 and 22. Remind yourselves that this is a promise worth waiting for from a promise maker you know you can trust despite how mediocre things look now.

And just quickly to anyone listening who wouldn't call themselves a Christian, I ask you to hear this psalm too. If you have a promise from God, you have everything you need to trust. And God has promised a judgment day.

[27 : 13] Despite what things may look like now, despite what you can or cannot see with your eyes, God has promised a day where he will crush his enemies and his people will be raised to honour. It is not too late to come to him and ask for forgiveness.

This joy could be yours. But to the Christian, know that you have great cause to rejoice unashamedly, now and forevermore, there is no need to turn anywhere else despite what we can or cannot see right now.

Let's pray. Some words from Revelation 21. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man.

He will dwell with them and they will be his people and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes and death shall be no more.

Neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore for the former things have passed away. Heavenly Father, we admit that there are times when we feel distant from you and we're sorry when that's because we trust more than what we can see with our eyes rather than the words you have given us.

[28 : 22] Please help us to have steadfast hearts. In this period of waiting, help us to trust in your promises with all joy, knowing that you will crush your enemies and your people will be raised to honour.

We love you, Lord Jesus, and we long for your return, for faith to turn into sight. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.