

The God who satisfies our longing souls

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[0 : 0 0] O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever. Let the redeemed of the Lord say so, whom he has redeemed from trouble, and gathered in from the lands, from the east and from the west, from the north and from the south.

Some wandered in desert wastes, finding no way to a city to dwell in. But hungry and thirsty, their soul fainted within them. Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress.

He led them by a straight way, till they reached a city to dwell in. Let them thank the Lord for his steadfast love, for his wondrous works to the children of men.

For he satisfies the longing soul, and the hungry soul he fills with good things. Some sat in darkness and in the shadow of death, prisoners in affliction and in irons.

For they had rebelled against the words of God and spurned the counsel of the Most High. So he bowed their hearts down with hard labour.

[1 : 1 5] They fell down with none to help. Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress. He brought them out of darkness and the shadow of death, and burst their bonds apart.

Let them thank the Lord for his steadfast love, for his wondrous works to the children of men. For he shatters the doors of bronze, and cuts in two the bars of iron.

Some were fools through their sinful ways, and because of their iniquities, suffered affliction. They loathed any kind of food, and they drew near to the gates of death.

Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress. He sent out his word and healed them, and delivered them from their destruction.

Let them thank the Lord for his steadfast love, for his wondrous works to the children of men. And let them offer sacrifices of thanksgiving, and tell of his deeds in songs of joy.

[2 : 2 2] Some went down to the sea in ships, doing business on the great waters. They saw the deeds of the Lord, his wondrous works in the deep. For he commanded and raised the stormy wind, which lifted up the waves of the sea.

They mounted up to heaven. They went down to the depths. Their courage melted away in their evil plight. They reeled and staggered like drunken men, and were at their wit's end.

Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress. He made the storm be still, and the waves of the sea were hushed.

Then they were glad that the waters were quiet, and he brought them to their desired haven. Let them thank the Lord for his steadfast love, for his wondrous works to the children of men.

Let them extol him in the congregation of the people, and praise him in the assembly of the elders. Let them extol him in the assembly of the elders.

[3 : 51] By his blessing, they multiply greatly, and he does not let their livestock diminish. When they are diminished and brought low through oppression, evil, and sorrow, he pours contempt on princes and makes them wander in trackless wastes.

But he raises up the needy out of affliction and makes their families like flocks. The uprights see it and are glad, and all wickedness shuts its mouth.

Whoever is wise, let him attend to these things. Let them consider the steadfast love of the Lord. I don't know about you, but the Christian life can often feel like a massive tug of war.

One day, we feel victorious over sin. The next, we've fallen again. One day, the gospel, the message, the saving message of Jesus seems so utterly beautiful.

The next, our hearts are hardened to it. One day, we feel so close to God, we almost imagine his breath is ours. Only for the next day, the heavens feel like brass.

[5 : 09] With us shut out beneath. One day, the promises of this world seem so wonderfully empty and dim. The next, we find ourselves burning with jealousy for the things of this world that we don't have.

And one day, heaven feels like our home and we long for it. And the next day, if we're honest with ourselves, heaven seems a pipe dream that will never actually be ours.

We all, as Christians, live in a tension. A tension between our salvation in Jesus and our heavenly home. We know, perhaps only intellectually, a lot of the time, that we are sons and daughters of the living God, that his spirit dwells in us.

That God loves us so much that he has our name carved on the palms of his hands. Yet we also know all too well the crushing disappointment of our sin, suffering, and the fullness of the world.

And in those moments, the love of God can feel so very distant. And as we read our Bibles, we see so many promises, don't we? Promises of spiritual victory over sin.

[6 : 27] Promises of a heavenly kingdom to come. Promises of the end of death and pain and sickness. Promises of a massive ingathering of the nations to worship the one true God.

Promises like the ones we just heard read in Romans. That the love of God can never, ever depart us. And I don't know if you're like me. Maybe it is just me, but I highly doubt it.

That we can find ourselves doubting those promises will come true. In the tension of the Christian life, between the now and the not yet.

Between the understanding of God's love and the full receiving of it. What can we say to ourselves and to God so that we can keep going? So, in the tension, what do we remind ourselves of so that we can keep going?

And that is exactly the question that the readers of the book of Psalms would have been thinking. Now, I'm afraid this is where, this is the tricky bit of the sermon. Okay, so I'm going to be making lots of intense eye contact to make sure that we're not falling asleep.

[7 : 29] This is the bit that we need to focus for, the hard bit. But I promise you that once we are through it, it will all well be worth it. Because often, I wonder if you've realized this or you've come across this.

There's a trap, I think, that people fall into when teaching or reading the book of Psalms. Which is that we assume that whilst all the other books in the Bible have an author and a reader. The book of Psalms doesn't really.

It's just this kind of floaty, nice songbook that sort of hangs in the air. And we can just kind of take one. And that sounds nice for today. And kind of apply it straight to our lives without thinking who it was written for and who it was written to.

And if you've been in Grace Church Dulwich for any length of time, your Bible handling nose should sniff a whiff of something off. The book of Psalms is a book like any other. It has a compiler, i.e. an author, and an audience.

It had an intended purpose for that audience. And it is our job to work out what that intention was so that we can then rightly apply it to ourselves. So I'm going to try and give us in two minutes the audience and the purpose of the whole book of Psalms.

[8 : 38] And if you have any questions about it, then you can ask Phil at the end. The book of Psalms traces Israel's history all the way from creation to return from exile.

It has many authors, David and Moses being the most famous, but it has one final compiler. And this compiler has organized the 150 Psalms in a particular order for a particular purpose for a specific audience.

Just like 2 Timothy that we've just finished, Paul the author wrote to Timothy the audience for a specific reason. So too, the compiler of the Psalms compiled the Psalms for his audience for a specific reason.

So who are the Psalms audience? This is the bit where please feel free to come and chat to me more at the end if you have any questions. But the audience of the Psalms, the people that the book of Psalms was given to, were the Israelites who had returned from exile in Babylon.

And so the Psalms are written for them. And we'll come on to the significance of that in a second. And the book of Psalms, it also has an introduction and it's difficult to overstate the significance of this introduction.

[9 : 50] And you could say that the whole rest of the Psalter, 148 Psalms, is a meditation on just these first two. The thrust of which is that the righteous man or woman must meditate on God's law day and night, waiting for God's king.

You could say in actuality that the whole book of Psalms is basically there for that purpose. To equip the man of God, the woman of God, to wait for the coming nation crushing king.

So to summarize our difficult bits, the book of Psalms are compiled for the Israelites who return from exile, encouraging them to keep meditating on the word of God, waiting for God's nation crushing king.

And as soon as we realize this, the Psalms becomes much sharper and much easier to apply. And so to make this less conceptual, for those of us who are bored and have switched off, to summarize everything that we've just said, we could just as easily say that the whole book of Psalms are written for people like Joseph, Mary's husband.

A man who was righteous, the father of Jesus. Nevertheless, what would Joseph think before the birth of his son as he reads the Psalms and looks at the world around him, waiting for these promises to come true?

[11 : 10] Joseph lives under Roman occupation in a nation that is supposedly God's land, yet has so many nations living in it. Joseph looks at the temple and sees that God's presence isn't there.

He looks at the Roman emperor and realizes God's promised king isn't there. In other words, Joseph is just like us. He lives in a tension.

He sees the promises of the Psalter, a king, a land, an inheritance, and then he looks at the world around him and does not see those things. Does that sound familiar? He sees the promises in the Bible.

He sees the world around him. And he can find himself tempted to think, is God really going to follow through? Can I trust the promises of God? So this Psalm is for Joseph and therefore this Psalm is for us.

What is Joseph supposed to do with this Psalm to persevere? What are we supposed to do to persevere in the tension? Deep breath. Well done. That was easy, wasn't it? Do come and ask me afterwards.

[12 : 14] I'm very happy to clarify. But the point is that Psalm 107 is here for people in the gap. People like you and me. So our first point, you'll notice on the back of the handout there is not an outline.

So I'd encourage you, if you have a pen, to do write and jot notes down if that would be useful to you. Point number one. That is the hardest bit done, by the way. You've done very, very well into the Psalm itself.

Point number one. Give thanks, Joseph, for the love of God. Verses one to three. Give thanks, Joseph, for the love of God. Let's read these words together. Oh, give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever.

Let the redeemed of the Lord say so, whom he has redeemed from trouble, and gathered in from the lands, from the east and from the west, from the north and from the south.

You'll notice at the top of Psalm 107 that this is the first Psalm in book five. The Psalter is organized into five books. And the last Psalm in book four ended with a call from God's people for God to rescue them from exile.

[13 : 22] Can you see verse 47 of Psalm 106? Save us, O Lord our God, and gather us from among the nations. And then if we come back to Psalm 107, verse 3.

The Lord has gathered in from the lands, from the east, from the west, from the north, from the south. In other words, Psalm 107 assumes that God has rescued his people.

That one day it will be true that the Lord has rescued in verses 1 to 3. It is essentially saying, Joseph, you can sing the victory song now.

You don't need to wait for the end to see this victory. It might look like you are under Roman occupation and that there is no hope of that ending. But the victory and ultimate return from exile is guaranteed.

So give thanks to God for his love. I was pained to include this illustration, and I almost didn't, out of loyalty to my home nation. But there was a chap recently who was so certain of England's inevitable victory over the Spanish in the Euros final that he got an enormous tattoo of the European trophy with England in 2024 written underneath it, tattooed all the way down his right shoulder.

[14 : 40] So certain, he did this the day before the final, so certain of the victory was our chap that he got this permanently inked onto his skin. Now obviously this illustration falls down because true to form England lost.

So perhaps the world of banking can help. We might remember the film or book, The Big Short. The guys there were so certain of the eventual collapse of the US housing market, they bet everything against everyone else, risking billions of dollars in the process.

And ultimately, they were vindicated when the market did indeed collapse. In other words, they were so certain of the future that they were able to act in light of that in the present.

And it makes sense, doesn't it? If we were certain and had ironclad proof, England would have beaten Spain, we'd have bet our house on it. If we had ironclad proof of the lotto numbers next week, we would buy that ticket.

The point being, certainty about the future means we can act in light of that in the present. And with God, there is no more certain of future.

[15 : 49] For Joseph, he is being told, Joseph, do not worry about appearances. Do not worry about tension. God's ways are so certain. His plan so established.

His love so secure. So steadfast. You can bank on it. So certain that you can begin your praises early. Joseph, take upon your lips the words, give thanks to the Lord for he is good.

His steadfast love endures forever. And of course then, for the Christian, that's the same. As we live in the tension, we can take those words onto our lips for ourselves.

That's point number one. Point number two, the sceptical among us, though, will have realised that Joseph hasn't really been given many reasons or any proof for why he can praise God for his love.

The difference at the moment between God and the chaps in the big short is that they did years of research before hedging to the teeth and risking everything on the US house price market. In other words, they had good reason for certainty about the future.

[16 : 56] But does the Christian? We've been talking about the tension. We've been talking about the promises of God and placing our trust in them. Does the Christian have good reason for believing that God's words will come true?

Does the Christian have such good reason for believing that they will come true, that they can praise God now? What is the proof that Joseph, and therefore us, can have certainty in the tension?

So much certainty that we can begin our victory songs early. So much certainty that we could get the Euros tattoo now of praise to the one true God for bringing us into his heavenly kingdom now, before it is truly ours.

And the whole rest of the psalm that John read for us is essentially answering that question. Giving us all the proof we need that we can trust the love of God for the future.

Giving us all the proof we need that God loves us and his love will sustain us until the end. And it does that specifically, I wonder if we noticed that in the reading, by reminding us of how God has acted in the past.

[18 : 06] In other words, you could summarize the whole message of this psalm as follows. You can trust God with the future because he has never let you down in the past. You can trust God with the future because he has never let you down in the past.

Trust God with the future because in the words of my colleague Andy, he has form. I don't know what that means, but I think it means the same as what we were just saying. And so the formula for Christian assurance in the ups and downs of life is that the Christian looks back to God's faithfulness so that they can keep on trusting God's faithfulness in the future.

That is always the pattern. God has never let us down. God's word has never returned empty. He has never failed to follow through. And in this psalm, it is no different.

So now moving on to verses just four, we're just looking at verses four to nine. From now, so sorry, our talk this morning is one to nine, I should have said. Our first point was verses one to three. Our second point is verses four to nine.

In case you were worried that we were only just, anyway. And in these verses, I wonder if you notice this, if you had some kind of more Old Testament bells ringing in your head, the psalmist reminds Joseph of the Exodus.

[19 : 23] There is Exodus language all over this psalm and a lot in our verses. Have a look with me down at verse four. Some wandered in desert wastes. Reminding of Israel's wandering in the wilderness. Verse five, hungry and thirsty.

Reminding them of manna that the Lord provided. Verse seven, he led them by a straight way. Reminiscent of bringing his people through the Red Sea. And verse nine, he satisfies the longing soul and the hungry soul he fills with good things.

In other words, the psalmist is saying, Joseph, Joseph, as you look around and as you are tempted to doubt that God will follow through, well, just remember the Exodus. Don't doubt God in the tension.

God is an expert in getting his people out of exile. He did it in Egypt. He did it in the wilderness. He can do it again. Of course, though, we have also noticed that the language of the psalm goes much further than simply feeding oneself in the deserts.

Because whilst it is true that God has brought his people from exile into the promised lands, the promises go much further. First, the image of return from exile is much bigger than the original Exodus.

[20 : 39] Do we see that in verses three? Sorry, three and four. Let the redeemed, starting at verse two, let the redeemed of the Lord say so, whom he has redeemed from trouble and gathered in from the lands from the east and from the west, from the north and from the south.

Not just from one nation as previously, but from all corners of the globe, this new rescue. And wonderfully, as New Testament Christians, we have actually begun to see this for ourselves in our own time.

I wonder if you've ever heard this accusation. I know a lot of my non-Christian friends throw this at me quite often, that Christianity is just a white man's Western religion and that it is just for the wasp, white Anglo-Saxon, Protestant, and then throw in middle class on top.

Well, there is a promise here in this psalm that God is going to rescue his people from all corners of the globe. In a recent report about the diversity of Christians around the world, I read this.

Christians make up approximately 31% of the global population. And as I'm about to read out the breakdown, I wonder where you think the majority of Christians are found in the world. Think about that for a second.

[21 : 50] 31% of the global population are Christian and here is a breakdown of where those Christians are located. Africa, 26%. Asia, 13%. Europe, 24%.

Latin America and the Caribbean, 25%. North America, 11%. Striking, isn't it? That you basically have an almost even spread of Christians all around the world.

and it's pretty evenly spread and it's surprising that the majority is not to be found in Europe nor in North America but in Africa and Latin America.

But this really is inconsequential in the sense that it is just further proof of the trustworthiness of the word of God. This is Psalm 107 verse 3 in action.

God is gathering a people from every tribe, every nation, every language. We just get to see a little bit more of it. In other words, God has form. God follows through.

[22 : 51] The Psalm also promises more than ending physical hunger. Verse 5 and verse 9. But I want us to notice how the Psalmist weaves Exodus language with soul language.

Have a look down with me at verse 5. Starting at verse 4. Some wandered in desert waste finding no way to a city to dwell in. Hungry and thirsty, their soul fainted within them. Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble and he delivered them from their distress.

Do you see how he's effectively weaving hunger language with soul language? He's effectively saying, remember Joseph how God satisfied the bellies of the Israelites in the wilderness.

Well, God will do the same with the soul of man. We'll think about that more in a second. The pattern, therefore, that the Psalmist wants to give us is being made absolutely clear.

We can trust God for the future, that his love will hold out because of his love for us in the past. And to think about us for a second, this is so significant for us to grasp.

[23 : 54] We are all trusting in the words of God in our lives and most obviously, I want to, apologies for getting slightly personal for a second, most obviously, we will all die.

all of us, one day, will breathe our last breath. And all of us, right now, if we are Christ's, are trusting that when we breathe that last breath, what will meet us is the face of Jesus and not nothingness.

We are all trusting that when our eyes close for the last time on this earth, we will open them to a warm summer morning in the new creation. And in the tension of waiting and trusting that that reality is the case, as friends of ours pass away, as grandparents and parents age, as we notice ourselves in the words of my colleague Fiona, managing the decline, what is it that gives us confidence in those cold, dark moments when we are tempted to doubt that when we finally pass from this earth, we will see God face to face?

What is it that gives us confidence in that moment? It is seeing that God has form. God is an expert on raising people from the dead.

If God had a CV, raising people from the dead would probably be first and foremost other than his glorious attributes. Lazarus called out of the grave, Jesus, the tomb was empty.

[25 : 28] And the point that this psalmist is making is that God will do it for us. And so just like Joseph, we, particularly in the area of death, we must look back constantly in order to give ourselves certainty in the love of God in the future.

And once we've looked back, such is the consistency of God, such is the utter commitment of God's love to his words and to his people. We can thank God with certainty now.

Oh, he is good. His steadfast love endures forever, even to me. So as we conclude, we return to Joseph.

Joseph lives in the tension of being under Roman occupation, waiting for the coming nation, smashing king. He's waiting and he might be struggling to trust. The promises of the Psalter have not yet come.

The king's not yet arrived. What is he supposed to do to persevere? Well, here Psalm 107 gives him that answer. He can praise God for his certain steadfast love and coming rescue.

[26 : 38] And he can praise God now because God has form. And that is exactly the same for us. Finally, we live in the tension, don't we, that we mentioned of the now and not yet.

We are exiles living in a broken world, in a broken body, with a certain future of death before us. And the only thing we have to hold on to are the promises that God loves us.

And that is it. And so what will enable us to persevere and trust his love? What are we supposed to do while we wait? Well, just like Joseph, we praise God for a certain victory by looking back.

The Psalm promises return from exile. We too can look back at the Exodus and know that one day God will certainly bring us home. The Psalm promises satisfaction for the soul and we can have certainty that one day our soul will have absolute rest in God because of how God has satisfied our soul in the past.

In the words of Blaise Pascal, there is a God-shaped vacuum in the heart of each man which cannot be satisfied by any created thing but only by God the Creator made known through Jesus Christ.

[27 : 50] and ultimately our great hope and our great reason for joy and to praise God's love now is that the tomb was empty.

In the words of Charles Spurgeon, he, the life of all our joys was dead. He, the resurrection of all our hopes was laid in the grave. But see the place where the Lord lay.

He is not here but is risen. The tomb is empty and that is the foundation of our faith. Or in the words of the poet George Herbert, death used to be an executioner but the gospel has made him just a gardener.

Not too long ago I was at a funeral of a school friend who was not a Christian and he tragically died in a motorbike accident. And it was relatively moving and they painted his coffin in all kinds of wonderful colours.

It was blue and pink and vibrant and there was graffiti on it which is one of his hobbies. But I was struck by the number of times that people professed that they were certain that he was in a better place looking down on them.

[28 : 58] And we've got to ask the question, don't we? Where does that certainty come from? Where does certainty in the face of death come from? Because the Christian God has form and every single other worldview every single other system atheism right through to whatever ism that you want to think about has none.

There is one God who has emptied the grave and his name is Jesus. So if we aren't a Christian here there is love on offer and it is a love that is not empty not wishful thinking not fairies at the bottom of the garden but a love that has form.

God is faithful in the past he is faithful in the future. So Christian brother and sister our command is simple in the tension praise God for his love because he has form and one day with certainty we know we will step into that bright morning.

Why don't I close us in a final prayer. Lord we thank you that the grave was empty we thank you that Christ was risen from the dead and that therefore because of his certain love for us in the past we can have certainty in the future.

Amen. Amen. Thank you.