

The God who rescues us from death

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[0 : 00] O be next to the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures for ever. 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, hungry and thirsty, their soul fainted within them. Then they cried to the Lord in their troubling, who 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 said, despise the wronging soul and the hungry soul he fills with good things. Some sat in darkness under the shadow of death, prisoners in affliction and in irons.

For they had rebelled against the words of God and spurned and cancelled from those high. So he bowed their hearts down with hard labour. They fell down with an amount of help.

[1 : 08] 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 arms apart. Let them thank the Lord for his steadfast love, for his wondrous works to the children of men.

For he shutters the doors of bronze and cuts in two of the bars of iron. Some were fools through their sinful ways, and because of their iniquities they 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, all his wondrous works to the children of men. And let them offer sacrifices of thanksgiving and tell of his deeds in songs of joy.

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.

[2 : 20] They mounted up to heaven, they went down to the depths. Their courage mounted away in their evil plight. They reeled and staggered like drunken men and met their wits' 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, all 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.

He turns rivers into a desert, springs of water into a thirsty ground, and fruitful land into a salty waste because of the evil of its inhabitants.

He turns a desert into pools of water, a parched ground into springs of water. And there he lets the hungry dwell and they establish a city to live in. They sow fields and plant vineyards and get a fruitful yield.

[3 : 27] By his blessing they multiply greatly and he does not let their livestock diminish. When they are diminished and bought low, through a freshen evil and sorrow, he pours contempt on princes and makes them wander in trepleless wastes.

But he raises up the needy out of conffliction and makes their families like flocks. The upright see it and are glad, and all wickedness shuts its mouth. The Rebbe is wise, let him attend to these things. Let them consider the steadfast love of the Lord. Thanks, everyone. Thanks, everyone. My name is Robert. If you don't know me, I'm a member of the congregation here at Grace Church.

Why don't we pray for God's help this morning as we come to his world. Let's pray together. Our loving Heavenly Father, we pray that as we come to your word, Lord, we would delight in your Lord and meditate on it day and night, that you would be making us more like your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ.

And in his name we pray. Amen. So, how does it feel to be free? If you're at school, how does it feel to be free from lessons from term time, contemplating those six to eight glorious weeks of summer holiday?

[4 : 58] If you're a worker, maybe you've got your annual summer break coming up with its freedom from the routines of office life. Freedom is a wonderful thing, isn't it? But, I'm sure you only need to tell you that true and lasting freedom can also seem to be very elusive.

So, at risk of starting on something of a downer, I'm sure you know the freedom of holiday's ends, schools work will start again. And when we look at the state of the world, freedom is in short supply, isn't it?

Everywhere we look, we are not free. We're subject to all sorts of things which constrain us. And as we look at the wider world, sadly, it is not free either, is it?

We don't have to look far to see news stories about the abuse of humans or animals. The rest of the national environment, wrongful arrests, suffering, injustice and death, sadly, are all too common. And if you would call yourself a Christian here today, how does the state of the world make you feel about God's promises to his people in the Bible? He's promised a new creation where there will be freedom from injustice and pain and death.

[6 : 11] And yet it seems sometimes, doesn't it, that we are a long way from that. If things aren't going well, if things seem hopeless and there's no end in sight, do you find yourself asking, how can we trust God to keep his promises?

Well, for the original readers of our psalm this morning, you'll be pleased to hear that they were asking the very same questions. God's people have been in exile, but they've now returned to the land of Judah, as we heard last week.

We can see that in verses 2 and 3, page 608, if you close this. So with their return, God's promises to his people seem to be getting back on track. Yet, the restoration of Israel there, in accordance with the soaring promises that God gave in the Old Testament, don't that might seem to fit the reality of where the original readers of the psalm found themselves?

So last week, Benji introduced us to Joseph, the earthly father of Jesus, a righteous man living after the return from exile. He can see the people who have returned to the land.

He can see the temple there in Jerusalem being rebuilt. Yet, he can also see Israel occupied by the Romans. And the nation seems small. It seems insignificant.

[7 : 29] It seems far from being the focus of God's blessing to the world. And lingering in the background, there's another question that Joseph is pondering. He's thinking, how can God do what he's promised, if those promises rely on the faithfulness of a sinful people?

What's going to stop God from acting to judge and punish the people for their rebellion against him in the future? And our psalm, Psalm 107, begins to answer that question. And we're going to see that in our passage this morning, which is verses 10 to 16.

So there are two things, I think, that the psalmist wants us to see from this section. First of it, God judges rebellion against him. God judges rebellion against him. And that is verses 10 to 12.

Look down, let me, at verse 10. Our section for today starts with the presenting situation that people are facing. And this is the second of those snapshots in the psalm. The second description of the predicament of the people of God.

Verse 10, book down, Some sat in darkness and in the shadow of death, prisoners in affliction and in irons. Now the word some there, at the start of the verse, can be better rendered as those who, those who sat in darkness and in the shadow of death, prisoners in affliction and in irons.

[8 : 48] So it's actually the situation of all mankind. Let me explain that one. So I visited Tower London with my kids last year. One of the places that we saw were the dungeons and there were prisons down there.

They were using iron chains. The cells were really damp. They were down below. They were close to the Thames. They were mouldy and dirty. There were enormous thick wooden doors with those tiny little windows, preventing anyone from getting out.

Heavy locks on the door. The prisons there had no more escape. And that's the situation that God's people Israel have found themselves in. They've been captured by the great power of the dead Babylon and taken into exile.

Now, it's hard to overstate what a tragedy the exile is for God's people. So the nation that bore God's name had been defeated in the battle. The temple had been destroyed.

So the sacrificial system had stopped and the people were evicted from the land that God promised to Abraham and their in captivity. So back to verse 10. How widely should we understand this?

[9 : 48] Is this just for Israel? Well, look down there. Those who sat in darkness and in the shadow of death, prisoners in affliction and in arms. So what does the psalmist mean there by in the shadow of death?

Well, from the original context, it's clearly he or she is contemplating the exile, the experience of the people, their time as prisoners, in danger of their lives being ended in a jail in Babylon.

But I take it that we're meant to understand it more widely than that as well. Because as a metaphor for the human condition, prison is a good one, isn't it? We started by thinking about the mess that we find the world in that, as we heard last week, death is an ever-present reality for the initial readers of the psalm, but also for us now.

No matter how far humanity tries, no matter how far we improve our medical technology, we cannot stop our bodies wearing out and we cannot stop death coming for each one of us.

Even though it might seem difficult to contemplate here, where we're here sat in London in sunny hall in the summer holidays, where there seems to be little shadow of darkness and where death seems far away, ultimately we cannot just escape it. It is just a matter of time.

[11 : 07] As a well-known Australian preacher, remember he said, don't worry, I'm not going to do the accent, he said, we're all in the queue for the crematorium. We just don't know how close to the front of the queue we are.

We are all living in the shadow of death. And as the psalm was read earlier, did you spot why the situation was so grim for them and for us? Look down with me at verse 11.

Verse 11, why are they in this situation? Why are they in prison? Why are they suffering?

Because they rebelled against God's word. They ignored his counsel and wisdom on how to live in the world that he created and instead they sought to live their own life.

And that is the very essence of what the Bible calls sin, rebellion against God and his world. Like the kids often talk about in their Sunday days, one of them from them. It's like saying to God, shut off.

[12 : 13] I'm in charge. No to your rules. It is that pride in all of us which says that we know better than God and which ignores how he said that we should live in this, his world.

And did you notice that I said it is in all of us? That's quite a counter-cultural idea. And I think our society tends to think that in general they're decently good. Perhaps there are a few rough edges in us.

Perhaps there are a few bad apples. But the Bible is clear that all humanity is in the same position towards God. Rebels against him. An earlier psalm, Psalm 14, says, The Lord looks down from heaven on the children of man to see if there are any who understand who seek after God.

They have all turned aside. Together they have become corrupt. There is none who does good, not even one. And what's the out-of-line of this rebellion?

Look down with me again at verse 11. For they have rebelled against the words of God, and spurned the council for the most honour. So he bowed their hearts down with heavy labour.

[13 : 25] They fell down with none to help. God judges rebellion against him and punishes it. And this is the right thing for him to do. He's the creator of the world, of everything in it.

So he is the one who rules and decides how we are to live in it. And yet it's also a loving thing to do, to discipline his creation. It shows that we are responsible for our actions.

It shows that he gives us agency, but also accountability for what we do. And it demonstrates that God is true to his character and that he keeps his word. All through the history of God dealing with his people, we see him promising to punish rebellion against him.

Now the historical exile, we consider another. That is one example of this. But ultimately God promised a sin that rebellion against him would be punished with death and exile from his presence forever.

Now we need to take this seriously. It is a very sobering thing. And it's a problem which affects all of humanity because we are all guilty.

[14:35] Now I remember a time when I was in school in year eight. We had those old school desks. I don't remember the ones they had. This kind of lid with a lid with a pink pot. Space underneath for storage for your books and things like that.

So to prepare for that French lesson one day when we knew we were getting a supply teacher. A few of the other boys in one house scrunched up a load of paper, scrap paper, into boards and stored them in various of the desks.

So then the teacher comes in. When he turns his back to writing the boards suddenly the rubies disappears in a blizzard of paper boards flying everywhere. When he turned back to face the class, magic would stop.

Now it didn't take him very long to figure out what was happening. And when that inevitable inquisition happened, no one had heard up. No one admitted guilt.

So we were all punished. We were all guilty. We were all placed into detention. So we need to recognise our own rebellion against God. We need to humbly admit before him that we ignore him and seek to run our lives our own way.

[15:40] And this psalm shows that rebellion against him is judged and is punished. But thank you, that is not where the story ends. So here is the second thing that the psalmist wants you to remember this morning.

So secondly then, God rescues those who cry out to him. And that's verses 13 to 16. God rescues those who cry out to him. I wonder whether you saw that there is a repeated refrain in this psalm as it was where there is repeated good news.

We know the problem. It's rebellion against God. But here is the wonderful solution. Verse 13. 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. It's there again in verse 6, as we saw last week. It's also there in verse 19 and in verse 28.

Those in distress cry out to God and he rescues them. Let's just dwell on that for a moment. Let's consider what's needed for people to be rescued.

[16:47] I think there's at least three things which are wonderful here. So notice that first of all, God is a God who hears the cry of his people. We've been thinking about people in prison, in the shadow of death.

So how does the prisoner communicate with the outside world? In October 2011, there were two charity workers in Somalia called Jessica B. Cannon and Paul, Hago and Fister.

They were clearly landowners. They were driving back to where they were staying when their car was stopped and they were kidnapped and imprisoned by Somali pirates.

They were snatched from their vehicle. Their phones were confiscated. They were taken to the compound and they were cut off from the outside world. They had no way to communicate with anyone. Their cries for help and for rescue went unheard.

And that's true for any prisoner, isn't it? They can cry for rescue, but unless someone hears, nothing will happen. Next thing to notice, God is willing to save his people.

[17:48] He hears the cry of his people and he wants to do something about it. And finally, God is able to save his people. When he hears the cry of his people, he's willing to save and he's able to do something about it.

Without all three of those attributes of God, there isn't going to be any rescue. After all, God could be able to save, but if he's not willing, then we're no better off following.

Or he could be willing to save, but powerless to do anything about it. And without him hearing the cry of the prisoner, there wouldn't be any rescue initiated at all.

Yet gloriously, God does rescue the prisoner. And see, the way that he saves the other son is the ultimate jailbreak. Verse 14 and verse 16.

He brought them out of darkness and the shadow of death and burst their bonds apart. Verse 16, for he shatters the doors of bronze and cuts into the bars of iron.

[18:50] It's incredibly dynamic, isn't it? He's bursting the bonds of the prisoner apart. He's shattering the doors. He's destroying the prisoner, the bars of gold. And notice that it is God doing this. It's not the prisoner.

Often our jailbreakers are seeing the years the prisoner wheezing their way out somewhere. They dig a tunnel or they disguise themselves as a guard. No, this is not the sanctioned. It's not the sanctioned, which is not Superman, and snapping the ropes.

This is God doing it. He is intervening from the outside to rescue those in prison. So back to Joseph. There in the moment.

How would that truth have given him confidence in God? Well, he can see the return from exile. He's back in the moment, the physical land that God promised to Abraham. And the temple is right there in Jerusalem.

The literal prisoners of the exiles have been rescued from their captivity and have been set free. But Joseph would also think that the promises of God are greater limits.

[19 : 48] After all, the nation of Israel was occupied by the Romans. And the sacrifices in the temple were ongoing, signifying that a greater rescue was needed. And we too have the benefits of being able to look back into him, but also the head in time.

And we have the cross of Jesus to give us even greater confidence. Because ultimately, all of the promises of God are fulfilled in his Son, Jesus. They all point to him.

Now when this song was wrote, I wonder, did any of our verses remind you of anything from the New Testament? So this is our one cross-reference. Keep it turned in your Bibles to page 1032. 1032 to Luke chapter 1 and verse 6 to 7. It's page 1032. So just a bit of context.

This is Zechariah. His son John the Baptist has just been born in this prophecy that he gives. So let's pick up verse 76 where he says, And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High.

[21 : 05] For you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God.

And the Lord will be called the Lord to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death. And in the shadow of death. To guide our feet into the way of peace.

So verse 10 of Psalm 107 is quoted here in verse 79. John the Baptist is the one who's going to prepare the way for the Lord Jesus who is coming. Who's going to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death.

And how's the Lord going to do that in Luke chapter 1? By giving knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins. Now we saw earlier, didn't we, that rebellion against God leads to death.

Yet here we learn that sins can be forgiven because of the work of Jesus. If sin can be forgiven, then God's wrath, his anger at sin can also be dealt with.

[22 : 10] And so death no longer adds power over those who are trusting in the Lord Jesus. So we left Jessica King Cannon and Paul Hagel in the fisted in captivity, unable to communicate with the outside world.

However, their location became known to the US government. In January 2012, an operation was launched to rescue Jessica and Paul from captivity. Some Navy Seals parishes into the desert of Somalia.

They approached the prison. They destroyed the doors and the bars which held them and rescued them both unarmed. They weren't able to rescue themselves. But when those Seals burst into their cells and offered them freedom, they had to trust that this was rescue being offered them from the outside.

And it's the same for anyone who cries out to Jesus for rescue. Through his death on the cross and his resurrection from the dead, God has opened the way for anyone who calls on Jesus and trusts in him to be free from sin and death.

Free to emerge from the prison that our sin puts us over. And incredibly, God shows his love in that he acted like this, sending his son to rescue those in the shadow of death, whilst we were still his enemies and in opposition to him.

[23 : 24] God's commitment to fulfilling his promises shows incredible love for his people. So how would this psalm help Joseph as he considers his situation?

And how should we acquire this? Well, here's a few words about the question as we wrap up. So for Joseph, he could consider the way that God has acted in the past and trust that God remains committed to fulfilling the great promises that he made to his people.

In particular, Joseph could see God's love to his people throughout and know that that love endures forever. And the right way to respond to that is with thankfulness and with trust.

But how about for us? Well, in many ways, it's exactly the same. We too should consider God's loving commitment to his people and be thankful for it. But we're in an even better position than the original readers.

We have the benefit of living after the cross. So we can look back, we can see God fulfilling his promises over life, death and resurrection of Jesus, who's broken those bars of sin and death.

[24 : 29] He can be forgiven and have loved with love. So we should therefore trust him and eagerly await his returning glory and will destroy death forever.

So why not spend some time this week dwelling around that God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

And the word to those with us this morning who perhaps you wouldn't call yourself a Christian, well let me encourage you to consider these things. The Bible is a historical document with real, well-attested historical events in it.

Why not spend some time looking at how God has dealt with his people in the past and see that he can be trusted to rescue from sin and death. Well let's just take a moment now to reflect and then I'll close in prayer.

So our loving Heavenly Father we praise you that you hear the cry of the prisoner and you are willing and able to save him.

[25 : 37] And we rejoice in your great love to us concerning your Son the Lord Jesus to defeat death forever. Amen. Thank you.