

What about transgender?

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Date: 15 July 2018

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[0 : 00] Yep, so the readings from Psalm 44, on page 564. Nor did their own arm save them.

But your right hand and your arm and the light of your face, for you delighted in them. You are my king, O God, ordain salvation for Jacob. Through you we push down our foes.

Through your name we tread down those who rise up against us. For not in my bow do I trust, nor can my sword save me. But you have saved us from our foes, and have put to shame those who hate us.

In God we have boasted continually, and we will give thanks to your name forever. But you have rejected us and disgraced us, and have not gone out with our armies.

You have made us turn back from the foe, and those who hate us have taken spoil. You have made us like sheep for slaughter, and have scattered us among the nations. You have sold your people for a trifle, demanding no high price for them.

[1 : 23] You have made us the taunt of our neighbours, the derision and scorn of those around us. You have made us a byword among the nations, a laughing stock among the peoples.

All day long my disgrace is before me, and shame has covered my face, at the sound of the taunter and reviler, at the sight of the enemy and the avenger. All this has come upon us, though we have not forgotten you, and we have not been false to your covenant.

Our heart has not turned back, nor have our steps departed from your way. Yet you have broken us in the place of jackals, and covered us with the shadow of death. If we had forgotten the name of our God, or spread out our hands to a foreign God, would not God discover this?

For he knows the secrets of the heart. Yet for your sake we are killed all the day long. We are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered. Awake! Why are you sleeping, O Lord?

Rouse yourself. Do not reject us forever. Why do you hide your face? Why do you forget our affliction and oppression? For our soul is bowed down to the dust. Our belly clings to the ground.

[2 : 31] Rise up. Come to our help. Redeem us for the sake of your steadfast love. Amen. Amen. Amen. Well, do be turning back, if you would please, to Psalm 44.

Which is on page 564 of the Church Bibles. And let's pray together. Heavenly Father, would you please take the tune of this psalm and lodge it in our minds.

So we might be thoroughly equipped with a right view of you and how we should live in response, whatever our circumstances. And we ask it in Jesus' name.

Amen. When the going gets tough is the start of a popular saying. And if you're of a certain generation, the title of Billy Ocean's most famous song, how does it continue?

I won't sing it to you, but the saying is, when the going gets tough, the tough get going. And that may be true to some extent in the world of work, at school and at home.

[3 : 46] A little extra pressure and some people can raise their game to cope with the new challenge. The worldly wisdom is to toughen up, to find our own solution to the problem.

But what about when the going gets tough as a Christian? When living wholeheartedly for Christ is really hard because it makes us really unpopular at work, at school or at home.

Well I think in that situation, glibly saying we need to toughen up completely misses the massive issue. Or nationally, when the Christian faith is so often marginalised or mocked.

The issue for the Christian is this. When the going gets tough, where's God? Why isn't he stepping in to make things easier personally or nationally?

Well we may think that at times we have a tough time living as Christians in this country. But in some countries and at some points in history, the tough time is of a completely different order of magnitude.

[4 : 57] In the 20th century alone, more people have been martyred for their faith than in any other century. In the last century, it's estimated that 30 million people have lost their lives for their faith.

That's five times more than the number of Jews killed in the Second World War. In northern Nigeria at the moment, Christian persecution is now so common that it's no longer news in the West.

It's nothing new. It's just happening all the time. We don't even hear about it. Where's God? Why hasn't he stepped in to stop this suffering? Well it's a huge issue for Christians.

And if you're here this morning and you wouldn't call yourself a Christian, then you're very welcome. I take it it's a big issue for you too. How can God stand back and allow evil and injustice to flourish? Particularly when it has a massive impact on the very people who are living for him. Well this is the first sermon of a summer series in the Psalms.

[6 : 03] And Christian suffering is the issue that Psalm 44 addresses. Look down at verses 22 and 23. Yet for your sake we are killed all the day long.

We are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered. Awake! Why are you sleeping, O Lord? Rouse yourself! Do not reject us forever!

God's people are suffering for God's sake. And God seems to be sleeping. Well why? So that leads us to our first point.

God is still in total control. Verses 1 to 16. Now this psalm is written at a time after the golden era of King David and King Solomon.

But probably before God's people are sent off into exile. And as we see from verses 9 and 10, when he's writing, God's people are rejected and disgraced, defeated in battle.

[7 : 11] From verse 13, we see that on the international stage, they've become the taunt of neighboring countries. And verse 14, the butt of international jokes.

Well I was clearing out my father's house recently and I came across a book of Irish jokes. They were all the rage some 20 years ago.

Now not particularly correct. So I won't tell you some of the jokes in the book of Irish jokes. But maybe as a Christian, you've been the butt of jokes in the office or at school.

Well that's how it was for God's people when this psalm was written. The psalmist can identify with the situation that you faced at school or at work. And it seems so wrong, particularly when the psalm writer remembers how powerfully God has acted in the past.

So if you look down at the first three verses, the writer remembers how God has established his people in the promised land. The focus is on a time when, verse 2, the nations were driven out and God's people were planted.

[8 : 21] When, verse 3, they won the land. This is the defeat of Jericho. That citadel whose mighty walls came crashing down so God's people could take control.

And in the years that followed, God's enemies were defeated so that God's people could keep control of the land. It was all down to God. Notice the subject of the first three verses.

Eight times in the verses, the word you or yours is used. And in case we've missed the point, verse 3 makes it clear that it's not by their own sword did they win the land, nor did their own arms save them.

It was all down to God. So God's actions in the past are those of a sovereign king that rules not just over his own people, but rules over all people of all nations.

And that's how the writer refers to God in verse 4. My king. If he's in charge of all nations, then he's in charge of everyone, including the writer of the psalm.

[9 : 31] So what's God the king doing in the tough times? Well, the surprise and the shock of verses 9 to 16 is that God is still in charge in the tough times.

Not just that he's in charge, but he's in total control of events. In the same way that the success of God's people was all down to God in verses 1 to 3, so the trials of God's people are all down to God.

Notice the repeated phrase, you have, repeated six times. It's God who's rejected them and disgraced them. God who's made them like sheep for slaughter and scattered them among the nations.

Well, resignation speeches are back in vogue in the House of Commons. 25 years ago, Norman Lamont left his role as Chancellor of the Exchequer.

And in his resignation speech, he said that the government gave the impression of being in office, but not in power. You might think there's an echo there of politics today.

[10:40] But it's the exact opposite with cosmic politics. God is both in office and in power and fully controlling what's going on, even when times are particularly tough for Christians.

So when we're shunned by other parents at the school gate for trying to share the gospel with them, when we're mocked at school or in the office for our faith, the shock is that God is totally in control of the situation.

And that raises the question of how we should respond to God and leads to our second point. So the second point, keep trusting him, verses 17 to 25.

If the wording of the psalm makes it hard to miss that God is in control, then the wording also makes it hard to miss that the writer and God's people keep trusting God.

We saw that in verse 4, when he refers to God as his king. And again in verse 8, where he boasts in God continually and gives thanks to his name forever.

[11:46] And this deep-rooted trust is again the focus of the second half of the psalm from verse 17 onwards. Despite his suffering and that of his people, they have not forgotten God.

Their hearts, verse 18, have not turned back, nor have their steps departed from God's way. So this suffering is not God's reaction to rebellion or a response to a rejection of God's will and of God's ways.

See, sometimes when things go badly for us, especially in our Christian lives, we can wrongly assume that it's God's punishment for something that we've done wrong. Well, that isn't the situation for the person writing the psalm, as we see from verse 17.

All this has come upon us, though we have not forgotten you. And that's really the consistent message of the Bible. Suffering in our fallen world often happens irrespective of how we personally have treated God.

We shouldn't assume that there's a connection between the two. So why does the psalmist keep trusting God in the tough times that he's facing?

[12:56] Well, I think the passage gives us three reasons. The first is that repeated refrain, You have. God's in control. And that's a great reason to trust God.

You see, there's no point in trusting God if he lacks the power to change the situation. Do you remember Nanazin Zaghari-Radcliffe, the journalist in Iran imprisoned on alleged spying charges? Well, it may have dropped out of the news, but she's still imprisoned in Iran on alleged spying charges. Well, Ms. Zaghari-Radcliffe trusted our Foreign Secretary, Boris Johnson, to speak up for her with the Iranian regime and to try to get her released.

Well, of course, Boris Johnson struggled. He was not in control of the Iranian justice system. And there's obviously no point in her trusting Mr. Johnson now after his resignation.

But you see, unlike that situation, God is in total control of every situation. So even though the situation is a dire one, we can trust him.

[14:02] He has the power to change the situation. The second is that God knows us intimately. So he knows better than we know what we're going through.

Look at verses 20 and 21. If we'd forgotten the name of our God or spread out our hands to a foreign God, would not God discover this? For he knows the secrets of the heart.

God knew the people's situation then better than they knew it themselves. And he knows our situation now better than we know it ourselves.

He knows how we're feeling. He knows the extent of the opposition that we're facing. And he's in total control of the situation. And the third reason we're given is that God is working out his purposes.

See, God may know the secrets of our hearts, but we don't know the secrets of God's heart in every respect. Yet in all the small details and difficulties of life, we can trust that he's working out his purposes.

[15:10] The writer recognizes this. So verse 22, the suffering is for God's sake. The writer knows God's character, what he's done in the past, and what he's promised to do in the future.

So he refers back to how God has acted in history to rescue his people, as we've seen. And he specifically refers, as we'll see in a moment, to God's covenant in verse 17.

And he refers to God as Lord in verse 23. Well, we'll think a little bit more about that in our third point. But before we do, it's worth just reflecting on the model response that we're given.

The trust that the psalmist shows continues in the face of great opposition and hostility from the world around him. But it doesn't stop him from questioning God or crying out to him.

So this is not blind trust, but a questioning trust that's honest with God about the reality of the suffering and pleads with him to remove it.

[16:13] Well, is that our response? I guess for some of us, the temptation might be to face difficulties on our own, to try to live out the maxim, when the going gets tough, the tough get going.

For others, the temptation might be to blame ourselves or to blame God. When the going gets tough, it's my fault or it's God's fault. Or maybe the temptation is to stop trusting God and start being more like the world around us, so as to reduce the hostility.

But for the psalmist, when the going gets tough, he keeps trusting God. And that's because he sees the bigger picture. I don't know if you went a couple of years ago to the Royal Academy.

There was an exhibition there called A Bigger Picture. It was an exhibition of David Hockney paintings. And often they were countryside scenes painted in garish colours with purple paths. And they were the size of double decker buses, some of them. And I think what David Hockney was trying to get people to do was, through a bigger picture, a very large canvas, to see details or aspects of a countryside scene in a way that perhaps they hadn't seen before.

[17:29] You see, our third point is God has promised to keep loving his people eternally. And that's the big picture that we need to remember in the tough times. You see, our perspective can become a very small one, in which our thoughts are dominated by what is putting us under pressure.

By contrast, the psalmist has a much bigger perspective. Not only does the psalm writer look back to the past and remember how God's acted in history, he also remembers that God has made promises.

Promises to his people that he'll always keep. What I think is fascinating is that at the moment of his greatest anguish in the psalm, the language changes from God to Lord.

He refers to God as Lord, Yahweh. The name that God gave himself when he spoke to Moses from the burning bush. When he reminded Moses that he made a promise to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob.

A promise to bless them and that through them all nations would be blessed. The psalm writer refers to this promise or covenant in verse 17.

[18:42] He knows that God has proved his love for his people in the past by rescuing them from Egypt and bringing them into the promised land, delivering on his covenant promise to them.

But the psalmist could sense that God had a bigger rescue in mind. That's why he ends his psalm with the confident words, Rise up, come to our help, redeem us for the sake of your steadfast love. Because he knows that his God, our God, is a God of steadfast love. Living in the 21st century, we're in a much bigger and better position than the psalmist to see the bigger rescue that God offers.

A rescue not from physical enemies, but from the spiritual enemy of sin and death. It's a rescue at God's personal expense. A rescue in which God himself would be a lamb to be slaughtered.

This is what was prophesied in Isaiah 53 and fulfilled in the death of Jesus. Jesus is described as like a lamb that's led to the slaughter.

[19:53] Isaiah writes, All we like sheep have gone astray. We've turned everyone to his own way. And the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

So, suffering unjustly for the sake of God's will is ultimately epitomized in Jesus' suffering for doing God's will on the cross.

As Jesus died, suffering so we might be redeemed for the sake of his steadfast love. It's shown in human history. It's proved in his resurrection.

And it's our confident basis for trusting that we can have a family relationship with God now. And an eternal future praising him and giving him thanks. Well, would you look on please to page 1138 to Romans chapter 8.

Because the verses that we've just been looking at, and verse 22 in particular, is specifically quoted by Paul in his letter to the Romans.

[21:05] So I'm going to read from verse 35 on page 1138 to verse 37 of Romans chapter 8. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?

Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?

As it is written, for your sake we are being killed all the day long. We are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered. No, in all these things, we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

So actually, tribulation doesn't conquer us. Distress doesn't conquer us. Persecution, famine, nakedness, danger, or sword doesn't conquer us.

We're more than conquerors through him who loved us. If we're trusting in Christ, nothing will separate us from the love of Christ. So the application of this psalm is simple to state, but a challenge for all of us.

[22 : 14] It's to trust God, or to keep trusting him, however tough our particular situation. Because we have the big picture of knowing that we are eternally secure in God's steadfast love.

So for those here today looking in on the Christian faith, can you trust a God who controls a world in which there's suffering, even for faithful believers, but who ultimately keeps his promise to love his people eternally?

And for those of us who are already trusting God, the challenge is to deepen our trust in him, so that in the tough times, like the psalmist, we can say, in God we have boasted continually, and we will give thanks to your name forever.

We were singing just a few moments ago, blessed be your name, on the road marked with suffering, though there's pain in the offering, blessed be your name.

It would be great if we can always sing that in whatever circumstances, because of the big view we have of God and his purposes. So as we close, let's pray together.

[23 : 29] Heavenly Father, we praise and thank you that everything is within your control. Please help us to trust you in the tough times, as well as the good times, and to live wholeheartedly for you, whatever the opposition, knowing your steadfast love will keep us eternally safe.

And we ask it in Jesus' name, and through his death. Amen.