

Song of Personal Praise

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[0 : 00] God, where are you? I wonder if that's ever been the cry of your heart.

I know it's certainly been my cry as I reflect back probably more times than I can accurately recall.

Let me ask you then, is there really such a thing as the silence of God?

Does God actually withdraw his presence from us sometimes or is it just our perception when things are difficult, when we're going through times of great difficulties?

It's interesting, you won't find too many Christian books that deal with this topic. It doesn't matter whether you're looking at current editions or you look at what's been written in the church back through the centuries.

And you've got to ask yourself, well, why is that? Why is there such little that's said about this? Is it perhaps because we're afraid to voice the questions of our hearts?

[1 : 08] One thing I do know is that whether it is actual or whether it's perceived, the silence of God is not a non-issue.

Just this week, as I mentioned to a number of people that I'd be speaking from Psalm 30, I got these sorts of responses, sort of like a bullet out of a gun. Well, Rod, how are you going to deal with the subject of God's silence?

You see, the psalmist says at the end of verse 7, you hid your face. I was dismayed. And this is not just isolated to one psalm.

I'll give you just a couple of examples, but they're right through the Psalter. Psalm 13, How long, O Lord, will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?

Psalm 42, I say to God, my rock, why have you forgotten me? Why must I walk about mournfully because the enemy oppresses me? So, friends, what do we actually make of these sorts of statements, these laments?

[2 : 20] And recall as you're reading through the Psalter, that these are the experiences of God's own, his own children. It's been described by one great figure of the 16th century church as the dark night of the soul.

And it's real. I know I've experienced it, but much more importantly, whether I've experienced it, it's in the Bible. So, do we then feel a little embarrassed by these cries of lament that we find through the book of Psalms?

They are expressions of disorientation. And as you read through the book of Psalms, the Psalter, you'll find that even in the darkest of Psalms, what we might call the Psalms of disorientation, never once, never once, does the psalmist say he no longer trusts in God.

God, where are you? I think the question arises in a believer's heart for many reasons, and I want to just very briefly identify a few.

It's not meant to be a conclusive list. Sometimes that question, God, where are you, arises because of our own psychological state. We may be depressed or in some other way somewhat disorientated in life.

[3 : 55] I think often it arises because of our own impatience. We want something to happen now as compared to God's timing. It arises sometimes because of our own slackness in spending quality time in communion with the Lord, whether in prayer, joining in songs of praise, meditating on scripture, fellowshiping with other Christians.

But I wonder whether you can think of other reasons. Have you thought about the effect of unconfessed sin in your life?

Well, I want us to see this morning the experience of the psalmist and then apply those lessons that we see to our own lives. So this morning we're looking at Psalm 30, it's the third psalm in our little mini sermon series, if you like, on the Psalter.

And this psalm is described as a psalm of praise, a psalm of thanksgiving. But it's interesting that psalms of thanksgiving, praise psalms, are actually closely related to psalms of lament. Because, you see, the thanksgiving psalms are often expressing praise to God for God having heard a lament, a cry of someone's heart. And so when we come to this psalm, we actually see some of the words of lament that preceded the praise.

[5 : 26] You might like to turn to that with me, Psalm 30. We're not actually given any specifics about the context of which this psalm set in, and that's often the case as we go through the book of psalms.

You'll notice that the title simply reads a song at the dedication of the temple of David. Now, I have to tell you, the commentators love these sort of titles because you can literally fill up pages in books on it.

But at the end of it, it's left somewhat ambiguous and it actually doesn't help us too much. But I think what does help us is to actually just, in a simple way, consider the structure of the psalm. And it just breaks down into three little sections. And the first one is just the first three verses, one to three. And these verses are simply an introductory declaration of intent to praise Yahweh or God. And they include, helpfully, in verse two, they actually include a summary of the whole psalm. I find that pretty handy. Then the second section is just verses four to five.

[6 : 28] And this is a call for all others to join in the praise. And then the last section, verses six to 12, if you like, narrates the psalmist's journey.

It's the psalmist's story. And I want us as we go through this psalm, these 12 verses, to see the many, many contrasts. So let's begin then in that first section, verses one to three.

And the psalmist simply begins with praise. He says, I will extol you, O Lord. And as we hear those words, we know that he's going to speak of Yahweh's saving acts.

Because this is the sort of expression that we often find through the pages of scripture. For example, when the children of Israel were taken through that extraordinary miracle through the Red Sea, and they're on the other side, the Israelites extol Yahweh for his deliverance.

You can read about that in Exodus 15. Well, the question then is, what is our psalmist's deliverance? What is he extolling the Lord over? So, the second half of verse one.

[7 : 40] For you, God, have drawn me up and did not let my foes rejoice over me. O Lord, my God, I cried to you for help and you've healed me.

O Lord, you brought up my soul from Sheol. You restored me to life from among those gone down to the pit. You see, friends, the psalmist was sick enough to die.

He was on the brink of death. And he's crying out for help because if he falls, then he's gone forever.

And you'll notice that the psalmist's enemies are rejoicing. They're actually rejoicing at his imminent downfall. You know, it's the sort of people who gloat over someone else's downfall, someone else's demise.

I'm sure you will have noticed this week I've got a bit of a, for some reason, some sort of morbid fascination in reading about the media. And the media, whether it's been the printed media or the TV, has just been full this week of stories of hatred, hasn't it?

[8 : 48] Stories of hatred amongst TV executives. And amongst those stories of hatred, you will have picked up lots of gloating. That's the picture. It's the modern picture of what we're seeing there with the response of these people.

And in verse 1, the psalmist says, God, you've drawn me up. And the verb that he uses is one that's used as if you were drawing a bucket of water up out of a well.

So the sense is, God, he reached down and drew him up out of death's pit when, apart from God, there was absolutely no hope for him at all.

Or you might think of the picture of a raging sea and someone drowning in it. And they're rescued by being pulled out by a rope. So just in these first couple of verses, you will have probably noticed already a number of contrasts.

There's the drawing up in verse 1, the going down in verse 3. God helped compared to the enemies who gloated. There's near death compared to restored health.

[9 : 56] And there's physical suffering compared to praise and thanksgiving to God. Did you notice in verse 2, it was God who was responsible for the psalmist's healing?

And I think that is a really important reminder for each of us living in the 21st century. Living in the 21st century with lots of great medicine and doctors and hospitals and technology.

I mean, what a blessing all of those things are. But it's God who actually deserves our praise. So when we're sick, we ought to ask the Lord for healing.

And when we do get better, then don't forget that it's actually God. He's the one who's healed you. But the psalm actually says more than that.

So let's read on and see what else it's got to say to us. So this next section, verses 4 to 5, having expressed his thanks to God, and you can understand that.

[11 : 01] He's just been healed. What does he do? The psalmist invites the people of God. They're described in verse 4 as God's faithful ones. He invites them.

He invites, in fact, all who listen to these words to come together and praise God. Sing praises to the Lord and give thanks to his holy name.

Now, this call to praise is for two reasons. Firstly and clearly, he's praising God because God has been gracious in healing him. But more importantly, he's praising God because it is God's nature to be gracious.

And we read in verse 5, for his anger, God's anger, is but for a moment. His favour is for a lifetime. Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning. Now, that second sentence of verse 5 is probably the sentence which is best known out of Psalm 30.

[12 : 01] But I don't want us to miss the first part of verse 5. It's critically important if we're going to understand God's word to us and apply it from this psalm.

For God's anger is but for a moment. His favour is for a lifetime. I want us to think about that. You see, this is the first mention of God's anger, his divine anger in the psalm.

And it indicates that the psalmist is relating his suffering that he's experienced, what he's suffered, he's relating actually to divine action as a result of his sin.

And so I want us just to pause for a moment and think briefly about the issue of suffering. The topic is huge. You could preach literally week in and week out and not exhaust what scripture has to say on it.

But to see what this psalm is saying, let me just give this very brief overview by identifying just a couple of points about suffering and why we suffer.

[13 : 15] Now, the first one is that each of us are born into a fallen world. It's a world clearly of decay. It's clearly a world of death.

And the Apostle Paul simply puts it this way in Romans 5. He says, therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, he's referring to Adam, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned.

So when we suffer, often that situation is simply being part of inhabitants, part of a fallen cosmos. But there's another category that scripture speaks about, and it's what we might call righteous suffering. And the classic example in scripture of this is Job.

Job suffered greatly, enormously. Everything was stripped away from him, and he was never told the reason why that happened in his life.

[14 : 22] Through these extraordinary trials, Job clung on to God, and he showed unconditional love back to his maker, and in so doing, made this extraordinary testimony witness to all of the angelic powers.

So the question is, did Job suffer because of sin in his life? That is, was God chastising him? And scripture says very clearly, no, not at all.

You see, this is God's testimony about the man Job. God says this, there is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil.

So we already see, in thinking about the topic of suffering, that there is suffering as being part of a fallen creation. And there's righteous suffering, where it's not the result of sin in someone's life.

And for reasons, perfect reasons of God, which often, as in the case of Job, in this life, are actually not disclosed to the sufferer.

[15 : 44] But there's a third category of suffering, and it's the suffering which tests our faith and it strengthens us. And James writes about it like this. He says, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy.

Why? Because you know that the testing of your faith, it produces endurance, and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing.

So, sometimes we suffer, and the reason for that suffering is to strengthen us. Well, you might be suffering as a righteous sufferer. You may be suffering as simply part of God's fallen cosmos, which is being redeemed and one day will be completely redeemed.

But fourthly, there is a suffering which is God's temporal judgment. I mean God's judgment in this world now on us because of unconfessed sin.

And God judges sin with a holy anger and he does it even in Christians. Why do I say that? Because that's the testimony of scripture. Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5 lied to the Holy Spirit.

[17:12] In 1 Corinthians 11, that great passage on the Lord's Supper, we see clearly that believers who were abusing the privileges of the Lord's Table or Lord's Supper were judged.

And if you just glance your eye down to verse 6 of our psalm, you'll see that the psalmist seems to have that not uncommon attitude of self-sufficiency, of self-confidence, of his health and prosperity being all about his own achievements.

And so that mention of divine anger in verse 5 perhaps indicates to us that the psalmist is relating his suffering that he's experienced because of divine action as a result of his sin.

So as we think about that, the question comes what should I do, what should you do as you experience suffering? And I want to just identify three points for you.

Firstly and most importantly, when we suffer, we need to come before the Lord and ask him to show us by his spirit if there's anything in our life that needs to be put right.

[18:34] I'm not just saying this as words, this is something that I've sought to bring into my own life and it would be embarrassing then to publicly list out those things that the Lord has so clearly shown me at different times.

And if you do that and you are shown things in your life that are askew, that are out of step with walking with the spirit, then we need to confess them. Knowing in confessing our sins that we're forgiven in the Lord Jesus Christ.

But secondly, having done that even if you're not convicted by the Holy Spirit, there's something quite amiss, askew in your life, then ask the Lord in humility to show you what you can actually learn by going through this experience of suffering.

I don't think that's an easy prayer. I know that's not an easy prayer. So come before the Lord, ask him to show you is there something wrong that needs to be set right and confessed.

Even if that's not the case, ask the Lord what is it that you want me to learn in going through this? And then thirdly, ask the Lord to heal you.

[19:54] There is complete healing in the atonement. But we will only experience all of its fullness when we're actually glorified in God's actual presence.

But in this world, in this temporal world in which we live, God may of course hear you. He might do it directly or he may do it through secondary means like doctors, medicines, technology, etc.

So ask him in faith and having asked him in faith then accept his will, accept his will as perfect and wise, whether that means you're healed or whether that means you're not healed.

Because friends, even if you are healed, we know that short of being here when the Lord returns, our bodies will still come to a point of final decay. There are some Christians who suffer greatly in their lives and we have those people in our parish here.

And it's intense suffering that just seems to go on and on. So what should we say of such circumstances? In the face of that sort of suffering, we need to see our experiences not only if you like in the time frame of this world, but clearly we need to keep a perspective on all of eternity.

[21:28] Well, the psalmist continues in verse 5 and he says, weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning. And as you read that verse, but as you read the psalms in general, it's worth remembering the literary genre of the psalms.

This is poetry. So we've got to be careful not to interpret the psalms in a very wooden way. So the verse is not saying, listen, set your clock and wait for 5 o'clock or 6 o'clock in the morning.

He's not saying that. Rather, weeping, the human reaction to the experience of God's anger, need not be a permanent situation.

If it contributes to repentance, then joy is experienced again. And for those believers, really, not to any of us, we're not in a role of adjudicating, but to those believers who are in the category of righteous sufferers, then even if their miseries in this life are great for reasons that are known only to God, they'll be more than compensated in the new heaven and the new earth.

faith. So what's the faith of this psalmist? He's daring to tell us that in the world in which we live, it's a world of change, it's a world of decay, in this world when our hearts are so often broken, when our faces are so often wet with tears, that joy may be a more abiding guest than sorrow.

[23 : 07] Do you notice again in verses four to five, just the contrast that keep rolling? God's anger versus his favour, weeping versus joy, night, mourning, a moment compared to a lifetime.

And so just in those five verses we sort of see a condensed idea, if you like, of the situation for believers. believers. And so before we look at the last part of the psalm, I want to pose this question to you.

What if you continue to go through life rejecting Christ and his gospel? What then is the situation? Simple answer is the situation is the total opposite of that that applies to the believer. you see, if you're an ongoing continuous Christ rejecter, you may actually continue to experience some good times here on earth.

Many do. There are also many who also experience what we might call hell on earth. And even if life as a Christ rejecter in this world is very hard, the problems of this life will actually seem like heaven compared to the judgment which is yet to come.

[24 : 36] Because it's the certain judgment of continuing to rebel against God's only son, the one that was read to us in John chapter one today.

So the shocking truth, and it is a shocking truth, it's an arresting truth, is that for such Christ rejecters, God's anger doesn't last for a moment, it lasts forever.

That is a shocking truth. But the great truth, the wonderful truth, is that the time to discover God's favour is actually now.

Because now is actually the time of God's grace. well, we've looked at those first two sections, so the third section is verses 6 to 12.

And as we come to these last verses, this is kind of intriguing, and it's not what you'll see in all of the Psalms, because we actually get an insight into the mental and emotional processes that accompany the psalmist's downfall and then his deliverance.

[25 : 48] So prior to his downfall, listen to the psalmist's sense of safety and security. As for me, I said in my prosperity, I shall never be moved.

It's false security. It's a security which is built upon himself. And that is no security at all.

So we get an insight, don't we, into the psalmist's life. Self-confidence, self-sufficiency, lack of any sort of recognition that God actually is the sovereign king.

And the psalmist has come to see his health, he's come to see his prosperity as all the works of his own hand, his own achievement, rather than seeing it as a gift of a loving God.

These psalms were written millennia ago, but how extraordinarily up-to-date that is, isn't it, for us 21st century dwellers. As for me, I said in my prosperity, I shall never be moved.

[26 : 58] And the Lord dealt with the psalmist. We might describe the Lord's dealings with him under the title, if you like, of God's severe mercy.

He uses the megaphone of suffering to bring the psalmist back to his senses. You see, the psalmist needs to understand we're not autonomous beings.

We don't exist in any way apart from God's favour. That's true of every man and woman in the whole globe.

It is especially true of those who are God's own, the ones described as God's faithful ones, his very own possession.

So how important it is for me, how important it is for each one of us who have been brought with the precious blood of the Lord Jesus Christ to live each of our days, every day, in complete awareness that we're not autonomous, that any prosperity that we have, the health that we enjoy, our sense of security, none of that, none of it is because of our own achievements.

[28 : 14] It's all of God's grace. I know that self-confidence rather than God-confidence is an extremely easy path.

It's the easiest path to walk down. Scripture simply says it is sin. You see, the psalmist had indeed been prosperous, he'd been upright, in fact described like the mighty mountains, but it wasn't because of anything that the psalmist had done, it was simply because of divine favour, and that's what the first part of verse seven tells us.

The psalmist exalted himself instead of exalting the Lord God Almighty. That's what the psalmist did, and then disaster struck.

God hid his face. And that image is actually used throughout scripture, and you'll see it often through the Psalter.

And it's not always, but most commonly, that image, God hiding his face, is most commonly associated with God's anger over human sin. And what happens is that the human is left feeling rejected by God, isolated, and vulnerable.

[29 : 50] And the realisation of this divine absence, what happens to the psalmist? We read that he felt dismayed. It's hard to get the force of the original word.

The sense is he was terrified. He was out of his senses. And I mentioned at the beginning that many believers, I think, know this experience of asking God, where are you?

The reasons are numerous. It might be because of impatience in our life. It might be because of our own psychological state. God's presence in our lives.

I've had an important mentor in recent years. This person in the last 20 or 30 years, I think it's reasonable to say that God has used this man, this friend of mine, throughout the Melbourne diocese to bring much needed reform.

A friend has suffered greatly from depression through all of that time. And as a result, his testimony is that he doesn't experience, we're talking about the very subjective side of our life, he doesn't experience that warm sense of God's presence that perhaps many in this congregation this morning do sense and feel.

[31 : 14] So can he still enter into God's presence with boldness and confidence as we read in Hebrews? based on his faith in the Lord Jesus Christ?

Can he? Absolutely. He's a godly man and he continues to be used mightily by the Lord.

But friends, that's not the situation of the psalmist. The psalmist has an unconfessed sin problem in his life and God is bringing him back to his spiritual senses.

And the awareness of his vulnerability brings the psalmist to a point of repentance, to seek deliverance, to seek the Lord's favour. So we read in verse 8, God's correctional judgment has restored him to his senses.

It's given him back a knowledge of the necessity of having confidence in God and not placing our confidence in ourselves. So the psalm concludes with the recollection by the psalmist of God's great mercy that was shown to him.

[32 : 54] Verse 11, you've turned my mourning into dancing, you've taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy so that my soul may praise you and not be silent. O Lord my God, I'll give thanks to you forever.

In verse 11 there, the mention of sackcloth describes the attitude in which the words were spoken. Because you see, sackcloth was the accepted clothing for someone demonstrating personal repentance, repentance from sin.

So my exhortation to you and to myself is simply this. We need to keep short accounts, very short accounts, with the Lord.

Don't let sin in your life impact on the joy, the wonder, of a healthy communion with your Heavenly Father.

Well, in verses 11 and 12 we just see more contrast, don't we? Mourning versus dancing, sackcloth compared to being clothed with joy.

[34 : 08] So the psalmist has come back to his spiritual senses and there is absolutely no way that the psalmist is going to remain silent. He's going to yell out, he's going to proclaim God's praises.

You can kind of understand that he'd do that, we'd do that in the immediate aftermath of being healed. Why not? But it's not just in the immediate aftermath.

The psalmist says he's going to praise the Lord for all time. And friends, we have so much to praise the Lord for. Because we actually live in a time of far greater blessing than the psalmist.

The Lord Jesus Christ has come. God has revealed himself in the completed scriptures. The Father and the Son have sent the Holy Spirit to indwell the individual believer, to indwell his body, the church.

So physical healing is a cause, it's a reason for great celebration, for great praise.

[35 : 13] But far greater should be our praise for spiritual healing, for spiritual deliverance. You see, that image in the Bible of being transferred from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of God's beloved Son, of knowing that our sins are forgiven, of knowing the certainty that Christ is coming back, of knowing the certainty of our resurrection, of knowing the certainty that there will be

a new heaven and a new earth for all of God's children.

In our last sermon series, we looked at promoting the gospel. And we certainly promote the gospel as corporately, as a body, we declare God's praises.

And we've got much to lift our hearts in praise to our mighty God. So we need to fill our hearts, we need to fill our minds with things of God, not things of a world which is literally passing away.

And as we fill our hearts, what will happen? It's very simple, it's very basic. It will then just simply overflow. It will overflow with praise.

And when it overflows with praise, that will attract others into God's kingdom as they repent and put their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

[36 : 36] You have turned my mourning into dancing. You've taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy so that my soul may praise you and not be silent.

O Lord, my God, I will give thanks to you forever. Father, Father, continue to speak to each one of us.

Challenge us, convict us, build us up, encourage us by your spirit as we need to respond both individually and corporately to your word.

We ask this for Christ's sake. Amen. Amen.