

Seeing God's Goodness

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[0 : 00] Good evening. As we start, let us pray. Lord God, we come before you. Look at your word with humility, asking again, as we have already asked, that you will speak to us.

And may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be now and always acceptable in your sight.

O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen. Well, this psalm is a psalm of lament.

And so often we don't really know what to do with laments. On the surface of it, it looks like it's not a very accessible bit of scripture.

It seems a little bit strange to us. There are no sort of verses that we can take out and sort of put on our walls and feel comforted by them.

[1 : 14] Let's look at it. Let's look at the lament and see what God is actually saying. But first of all, I just want to, and on your handouts, you will see a definition, which is also on the screen, of what a lament is.

It's a type of worship that recognizes the distance between the world as we experience it and the world as it should be, given who God is, his goodness, his power and his love.

It's a request to God to complete his project of making all things new. So it's recognizing that there is this dissonance between what we experience and who we believe God is.

And we feel a little bit uncomfortable in praying laments ourselves very often.

We feel uncomfortable because, well, somehow our experiences don't feel all that bad compared to, you know, the huge things.

[2 : 32] When our experience of life falls short of God's ideal, somehow we feel like, well, it's not bad enough to bother God with.

Or maybe we feel that God won't really act in this situation. Yeah, yeah, yeah, I believe God acts, but that's for special occasions.

That's, you know, something different. But more often, I think as Christian people, we don't think we should. Laments aren't very polite to God.

We might offend God. We might say something bad that really gets us into trouble and we end up sinning. And we do see that there's some quite shocking things.

In this psalm, there are some quite shocking things said. It's real. It's honest. This is not being polite to God.

[3 : 40] It's being real with God. And God wants us to be real. So the laments of scripture help us, lead us into how we can lament ourselves.

And I think they deal with those discomforts that we have talked about. And we'll see that as we go through the psalm. This psalm is a corporate lament.

That is, it's for God's people. It's not, woe is me. It's rather, woe is all of us. We are all in trouble.

And if we look at the situation of the people of God in, at this time, they were, they had good reason to say, woe is us.

Because the Babylonians had invaded. The Babylonians had come and taken out, not just some benign takeover.

[4 : 45] The Babylonians had come and they were cruel. They were brutal. They were merciless. The Israelites had seen all the atrocities of war that we know from our newsreels, etc.

Loved ones had been brutalized and killed. Everything they had was either stolen or destroyed. They were homeless.

They were helpless. And to an extent, they were hopeless. There was no UN to look over the invaders' shoulders.

No conventions of war to restrain them. Things were indeed desperate. And worse than that, worse than that even, the temple, the physical sign of God's presence with them, had been destroyed. Yahweh, their God, was not acting to reverse the situation. The Babylonians' disgusting gods had been set up in his place.

[6 : 08] Seemingly victorious over Yahweh. What was going on? Why wasn't God doing anything? So that's the context of the psalm.

That's the situation that we read in verses 1 to 11. So verse 1, the psalmist goes straight into it. Why? Why? Why, God?

Why have you rejected us forever? Why does your anger smolder against your sheep, your people? Why? Why? Now, God had promised in the past, several times, that he would never leave or forsake his people.

In Deuteronomy, verse 6, and it says, God, through Moses, makes the promise that he would never leave or forsake his people.

And it's repeated a couple of verses later in verse 8, exactly the same words. He will never leave or forsake you. And yet, here we are.

[7 : 36] God had said, forever, I will not reject my people. The psalmist now says, you have rejected us forever.

It's almost direct opposite of what God said he would do. Now, it's an obvious exaggeration. It's like me as a teenager complaining outside the bathroom that my elder sisters had been in there forever. Or, more seriously, when we have an illness or the treatment for an illness, it seems like it's going on forever.

It's an exaggeration that gets across that this has been our experience and it doesn't seem like it's ending. It's not expressing facts.

It's expressing feelings. This is what we are feeling, that you have abandoned us and it feels like it's gone forever. And the overstatement is also an appeal to God's promise.

[8 : 56] Of course. And the psalmist uses the language of scripture to refer to God's people. The sheep of his pasture.

This was the language of the covenant through Moses. Moses having been a shepherd himself. God uses that language. These are the sheep of my pasture.

Again, through David, who also had been a shepherd. These are the sheep of my pasture. They are the people that God seems to have abandoned.

And then, in verse 2, he hammers this home. These are the people that God purchased.

His tribe. His redeemed people. They are valuable to God. He's paid for them. In Exodus 19, Israel was referred to as God's treasured possession.

[10 : 07] It reminds me of a time when I was teaching in Nigeria. I can't even remember what I was teaching.

Anyhow, during the break in the class, all of the students, of course, went outside and were messing about outside. And this one time, they seemed to be all teasing one of the students. A guy named Manasseh Chanwat. And I went out there and I heard all this, you know, back and forth, this banter. And I said, well, what's this all about?

They said, oh, in the Mwagavur language, Manasseh was a Mwagavur man. In the Mwagavur language, Chan means the very best piece of food.

But Wat means to fling it to the ground. So they were teasing him because he was a very special thing that was tossed out.

[11 : 18] Chan, wah. And that's what the psalmist is saying God has done with his people. The very precious people have now been rejected out of hand.

And verse 2 goes on to say, not only have you rejected your people, you've rejected your place. Mount Zion, where you dwelt, your dwelling place has been rejected. And verse 3, the place where God connected with his people has now become an everlasting ruin.

In verse 3. And that's a disaster. Because now there's no place of meeting with God. There's no connection with God anymore.

What will they do? And he talks about how the place of God, the temple, was destroyed by the enemy.

[12 : 37] In verses 4 through 8. The foes had roared through there and done their thing. They destroyed and defiled.

They roared in defiance of God. They set up their standards, the symbols of their false gods. And they cut. And they smashed.

And they burned. 2 Kings 25, when it talks about these events, it says that in Jerusalem, every building of any significance had been burned to the ground.

And that included the place of most significance, the temple. It was devastating.

No wonder. Verse 9. Says. We've given no signs from God.

[13:45] No prophets are left. None of us knows how long this will be. No sign. No prophets. No word from God. When's it ever going to end?

You feel the despair here. No. No. And again, this expresses the emotion.

It doesn't give the whole reality. We know that even while this was being said, the prophets Jeremiah, Isaiah and Ezekiel would have been active.

We know that they had the word of God given through Moses. We know that they had the records of the early prophets, the writings of David.

So it's not exactly true. But it expresses the despair of God's people.

[14:57] And we're left with the questions of verses 10 and 11. How long? Why? Why? The psalmist gives vent to his passion.

How long will they mock you, God? How long will they revile your name? Why aren't you doing something? Take your hands out of your pockets and do something.

Destroy them. I charged words. But wait a minute.

Wait a minute. Let's remember who we're talking to here. Verse 12. God is my king.

From long ago, he brings salvation on the earth. God's the king from of old. He's the one who brings salvation.

[16:09] God's the king. God's the king. God's the king. God's the king. That's who he is. King. The savior. And verses 13 to 17.

The psalmist takes time to remember God's activity from the past. God's the king. In both salvation and creation. Now, he does this in figurative sort of language.

And it's easy to get distracted and confused with monsters and Leviathan and the creatures of the desert, etc. But I think that that can be a distraction if we overlook the repeated phrase that's here. It was you. It was you who split the sea. A reference to the Exodus. Remember, they passed through the waters of the Red Sea.

It was you who broke the heads of the monster in the waters. The waters came back over the Egyptians. You remember that. It was you who crushed Leviathan and fed him to the desert creatures.

[17:25] Another way of representing God's triumph. Leviathan was a figure of the enemy of God. Used in the Old Testament and in the New Testament in Revelation, actually.

So this is really a timeless statement of God defeating his enemies. It was you. It was you who opened up the springs and the streams.

Now, turning not just to the Exodus experience where he did open up springs in the desert. But also, this is about creation as well.

It was you who dried up rivers. The day and the night. The sun and the moon are yours. Now, those were the very symbols of the gods of Babylon.

Sun and moon, day and night, summer and winter. It was you who created the boundaries of the earth. You made both summer and winter.

[18:31] It was you. God, it's always been you. You know what you are doing. You always have. When we face times of trouble, when it feels like God's gone on holidays or is standing around with his hands in his pockets, it's good to remember his activity in our past and in the past of his people through the ages.

And declare, it was only you. You see, God's not only powerful enough to act.

He's the king. He's the creator. But he's compassionate enough to act. He's the savior. Who wants to act.

So in light of that, the psalmist turns back to his appeal, this time with hope rather than despair.

The situation of verses 3 to 11 hasn't really changed. But in remembering who God is, the despair that's expressed in verses 9 and through to 11 has been infused with hope.

[19:59] And in this, there are three do's and three don'ts in the verses 18 to 23.

Three things that he's asking God to do and three things that he's asking God not to do. So, and they center around the covenant of God with his people.

What he's not only said he wants to do, but what he has promised he will do for his people. So, verse 18.

Do remember the mocking of the enemies. The reviling of foolish people. It's kind of, the contrast is clear.

In verse 10, the people who mocked God were just the enemy, the foes of God. Now, they're recognized as foolish people.

[21 : 01] Opposing the king over everything. The creator, the master of the universe. The only savior is foolish.

Verse 19. Don't hand the life of your people. Here, characterized as a dove, harmless and innocent to the wild beasts who threaten.

Don't forget the lives of your afflicted people. Don't forget the life of your people. Don't forget the life of your people. Don't forget the life of your people. We're still afflicted. The situation hasn't changed from verses 1 to 11.

But now, everything's left in God's hands. Verse 20. Do have regard for your covenant.

Because there's violence in the dark places. Threatening God's purposes. God's covenant is God's plan or agreement of how he's going to deal and live with his people.

[22 : 16] God's plan. God's plan. God's plan. It's been renewed and clarified through the ages. But it's still the same. Even though the psalmist feels like there hasn't been a word from God for a long time.

His purposes remain the same through the ages. His purpose to draw a people to himself. First expressed to Abraham way, way back then.

Has been repeated and repeated. And it remains the same. More and more clarity is given to it. And the covenant as it's given through David was that there would be a person.

A king. Who would come. And save his people. And draw. And God's purpose to draw people to himself would be centered around that one person.

So the psalmist then is saying, all the things you promised in your covenant, bring it on, Lord.

[23 : 23] Bring it on. And so verses 21 to 23 give us the second don't and the third round of do's and don'ts in the light of God remembering and acting on his covenant.

Don't let the oppressed be disgraced. Do give the poor cause to praise you. Rise up. Defend your cause. Remember the mocking fools.

Don't ignore the noise of your enemy. And then there's no more in the psalm.

We don't hear. We don't see the end of it. We don't see what happens next. We'll go on to look at what happens next.

But that's the end of the psalm. The psalmist is left trusting God.

[24 : 37] While everything is falling apart. There's hope in the disaster. But it's still disastrous. Until one day, many years later, as we read in the New Testament reading in Luke chapter 2, an old man was in the temple.

And he'd been promised that he would see the consolation of Israel. The answer to this psalm he was expecting.

Verse 25 of Luke 2. There was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel.

And the Holy Spirit was on him. And when Simeon took the baby Jesus in his arms, he looked at this baby and he prayed.

And he said, Sovereign Lord, As you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you prepared in the sight of the nations, a light for the revelation to the Gentiles and the glory of your people Israel.

[26 : 11] In other words, this baby is the answer to Psalm 74. This is the consolation of Israel.

This is where you resolve that absence. And we learn that, that in fact, Jesus was. God tabernacling amongst us.

That's what John 1 tells us. He was the epitome of God amongst his people. God with us.

Everything that the temple was ever supposed to be was embodied in the Lord Jesus. He is the way that God is working out his covenant promises to bring a people to himself.

And it wasn't just coming as a baby. But as that temple, Jesus himself was rejected and destroyed.

[27 : 23] And the enemies crowed over that. On Good Friday. It looked like, once again, it was history, or as they say, deja vu all over again.

It was, it was happening again. God was abandoning his special place. And yet, and yet, that isn't the end of the story at all.

Because God raised Jesus. And God lives in his people. And those who belong to Jesus, who trust in his name, Ephesians tells us that we are now the temple of God.

In fact, Paul repeats that several times throughout his letters. But in Ephesians, chapter 2, verses 21 and 22, in him, the whole building, that is, the whole building of Christ's people, is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord.

And in him, you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his spirit. We are the temple of God.

[28 : 54] We are where God lives amongst his people. That's amazing. And sometimes, actually, we see the dwelling place of God, that is, us, God's people, God's church, being torn apart by evil people, by apathy, by unbelief.

The church is getting persecuted. In parts of the world, people are getting killed for being Christian. For even just the simple act of coming to church on a Sunday, you can be executed. And even in this country, the churches we know, lies, half-truths, and false values are taking the place of God's word in some parts of the church.

And well might we cry out, why? How long? The temptation for me is to get cynical about all that. Yeah, that's how it is. to think the worst of people and expect only the bad. But this psalm stimulates me to pray for God's church, especially where I see it broken, distressed, and not fulfilling God's purposes for it.

[30 : 54] Especially where it is in need. We need to remember who God is and what he's done.

What his character is like and all the things that he has promised. we need to keep our eyes on Jesus, the author and the perfecter of our faith.

The covenant of God is written in Christ's blood. He will build his church. 1 Peter 2, verse 9, says that we are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, God's chun.

that we may declare the praises of him who called us out of darkness into his marvelous light. That's us. That's God's church. We need to keep declaring the praises of him who called us out of darkness into his marvelous light.

[32 : 16] We need to keep praying to God for the church, for each other, that his will be done. God's big purpose is still to call a people for himself that will declare his praises and glorify him forever.

He's the king. He's the head of the church. He's sovereign over it. He's fulfilling his purposes even though we don't always see it like that.

Because God plays the long game. God's less concerned for immediate and quick results and resolutions than we are.

we see the current situation from our limited perspective but God takes the big view. He has the big picture.

He sees it all from the beginning to the end. And it's good for us to feel the pain of God's people. people. In 1 Corinthians chapter 12 verse 26 Paul is talking about the church as a body, the people of God as a body.

[33 : 40] And he says that we are all part of each other and if one part suffers, every part suffers with it. If one part is honoured, every part rejoices with it. when the church is forced to meet in secret for fear of arrest like in China, in parts of Mid-Asia or parts of the Middle East, we should feel it.

When believers are forced underground very literally because their homes and meeting places are being bombed on the surface, for example in Ukraine or more recently still in Khartoum, we should feel it.

When Christian people are being slaughtered just for being Christian in parts of northern Nigeria, does it cause us pain?

closer to home, are you grieved when the church is mocked as a joke?

When God is placed on the same level as Santa or the Easter bunny? Do you feel the pain when people in the church itself deny the truths of scriptures?

[35 : 13] and effectively relegate God to a lower level of importance in the world? Does that bother you?

If we feel this pain, God wants us to bring that to him. We can be real, we can be honest with God, keeping in mind who he is, the creator and master of everything, but we can be honest with him. He's got big shoulders, he can take it. We won't offend him. He longs to hear our prayers. And it's a good thing when we do pray, and I know that we do pray for our church, we pray on our own, we pray together, we pray in services like this one, we pray for the church.

In our small groups, we pray for the church. In the kingdom growth night, we pray for the church. Let's keep doing that. Let's not neglect it. Because I think the question, the big question, is the one that I've got on the slide there.

Not whether God will answer, but whether we'll continue to cry out to him in faith. Let's pray.

[36 : 54] Lord God, our Heavenly Father, we feel the pain of your church in pain.

We see suffering, we see abuse, we see things that aren't as they should be, and we grieve for that, and we ask you to act, to make things right, to make your people, your bride, what it is intended to be.

Oh, Lord God, would you stimulate our hearts to keep praying, to keep being compassionate, to keep agonizing with you.

Lord, we pray that you would teach us to lament over things that we see are wrong, just as you teach us to rejoice over the things that are right and good. thank you, in Jesus.

Amen.