

Strength for the Present from the Past

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- [0 : 00] Let us now turn to the part of scripture that we read.
- The book of Psalms, Psalm 85. And we may read at verse 4. Turn us, O God of our salvation, and cause thine anger toward us to cease.
- I am sure you all remember the petition that was offered by David, and that great penitential Psalm, Psalm 51.
- Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not from thy presence, and take not thy Holy Spirit from me.
- Restore unto me the joy of salvation, and uphold me with thy free spirit. David is not merely seeking forgiveness.
- [1 : 26] He is seeking spiritual revival and renewal at a personal level. And it seems to me that the psalmist in this psalm shares that same longing for revival and spiritual renewal in the life of the nation.
- And it ought to be a desire that ought to be present in all our lives if we love the Lord Jesus Christ.
- It seems to me that that longing ought to characterize every believer.
- It's difficult to pinpoint the time when the words of this psalm may have been written. But if any period in the history of the nation of Israel were to be pinpointed, the words may have been written at the time when the nation returned from their captivity in Babylon.
- Do you remember how the Bible speaks of the incredible sadness and desolation that was experienced during the days of captivity by the rivers of Babylon?
- [3 : 05] There we sat down. Yea, we wept when we remembered Zion. We hung our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof.
- For there they that carried us away captive required of us a song. And they that wasted us required of us mirth say, sing us one of the songs of Zion.
- And you remember then what follows. How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land? And you know, believers must still go through periods in their lives when they too feel they are in a strange land and they cannot sing.
- You may also remember that the Bible reminds us how in the overruling providence of God, the return from Babylon was decreed by Cyrus king of Persia.
- Strange how God works in providence. And shortly after their return they laid anew the foundations of the temple.
- [4 : 24] And you will remember that the work ceased. They were discouraged. The task was great. The city of Jerusalem itself was in ruins.
- The walls of Jerusalem were broken down and the gates burned with fire. It was certainly a dismal, desolate scene. And the people were vulnerable and insecure.
- You may also remember how the prophet Haggai rebukes the nation for their lack of work on the temple.

And during that period of his prophesying they rebuilt the temple. And under the leadership of Nehemiah the city walls were rebuilt.

So we have a forgiven nation. But a nation not yet fully restored. And it appears to be that it is against that backdrop that the words of this psalm were composed.

[5 : 35] The psalmist sets before us four steps which lead from discouragement to rejoicing.

And tonight I just wish to look in a little more detail at two of these steps. Remember this is a prayer for revival.

For quickening. His confidence to pray this prayer is encouraged by the Lord's dealings with them in the past.

So two points this evening. He remembers the grace of God in the past. And he resorts to God in the present.

He remembers the grace of God in the past. And that act of remembrance is set before us in the first three verses of the psalm.

[6 : 39] The psalmist remembers how great the favor and forgiveness of God was in the past. Lord, thou hast been favorable unto thy land.

Thou hast brought back the captivity of Jacob. Thou hast forgiven the iniquity of thy people. Thou hast covered all their sin. Thou hast taken away all thy wrath.

Thou hast turned thyself from the fierceness of thine anger. Thou hast taken away all thy life. And so he writes of what had happened in the past. And you notice how that is emphasized by the verbs that are used in these verses.

They are all in the past tense. So he's looking back. He's looking back with affection to a time in their past history when they enjoyed the favor of God.

And it is important to recall and remember. Now this is not speaking of something like you may forget to do, like making a phone call you were supposed to do, or write a letter if you write letters.

[7 : 56] His remembering of these events is as if he were momentarily reliving the past.

Now you will perhaps have heard you cannot relive the past or live in the past. And that is true. There's a danger that we try to live in the past or relive the past.

But equally, in my view, it would be a fatal error to blot out the past as if it never had happened.

There is much to be learned from the past. There is much to be learned from history. If only, if only, not to repeat the same errors that we may have made in the past.

And this remembering of the past reminds me of some of the privileges I enjoyed along life's journey in meeting with and hearing and listening firsthand from people who lived through times of real revival in this island.

[9 : 18] I can think of the moment of people I met who were in the past. Now these revivals were pre-Second World War, so it's going back a long time.

I can think of people I met who were in the Gally Vark revival, who were in the Lochs congregation in North Lochs, when there was real revival there.

My father was brought up in that congregation. I met people in the Carly Vark congregation who were in the revival, and it was a privilege to be in their fellowship and in their company.

And in fact I was married by one of those who was in that revival, the late Reverend Mordor Macaulay. And I met some in the district of Point, to name but a few.

And to hear those people speak of these times, largely in that period pre-Second World War, it was as if they themselves were reliving the experience as they reflected on times of an outpouring of the Spirit of the Lord.

[10 : 42] Times of real quickening and blessing. Times of real quickening and as I listened to them, I was momentarily transported.

And there was a leaping of joy in my own heart, as they retold these days. I think the kind of reaction, although not quite the same, that Elizabeth had when she met Mary, the mother of her Lord.

And so, these incidents in the past, they are important.

And they ought to make us long for times like that to again revisit us in this island. Because you found such joy and such pleasure in hearing of the work of the power of the Holy Spirit in applying the truth.

And I suppose there's a point on sight to those revivals, because some of those who were in these revivals pre-Second World War, they left home as part of those who were called up to fight for their country, and they never returned.

[12 : 05] So, that may have been in the overarching providence of God. That may have been why that blessing was outpoured.

It's important to remember. And you remember how the psalmist then lays emphasis on the need to remember in Psalm 103, Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits.

Well, the grace or the favour of God. And the psalmist is remembering that period in the life of the nation.

As John Calvert wrote something like this, Nothing contributes more effectually to encourage us to come to the throne of grace than the remembrance of God's former benefits.

And that is borne out again and again. It was that very thought that prevailed on the mind of the great Dr. John Duncan, known as Robbie Duncan, when beggars would come to his door.

[13 : 26] And he was on the point of closing the door on their face. He would hear them say, You helped me before. Help me before.

Here then the psalmist is remembering what God did in the past in bringing his people from captivity. Look again at the emphasis.

Lord, thou hast been favourable. Lord, thou hast brought back. Lord, thou hast forgiven.

Lord, thou hast taken away. Lord, thou hast turned thyself from the fierceness of thine anger.

Why were they in captivity? They were in captivity because of their sin and disobedience. But God brought them back. And you see, the emphasis that is placed before Assyrius is, they did not bring themselves back through any ingenuity on their part.

[15 : 03] It was all the doing of the Lord. It wasn't even the king of Persia who brought them back. It was God who brought them back by his own power, in his own way, at his own time.

And the reason that they were brought back is directly traceable to the grace of God. You have been favourable.

Otherwise, you have exercised grace. Thou hast brought back. And in doing so, they were forgiven. Thou hast forgiven. How were they forgiven?

And the answer we find in the psalmist is, Thou hast covered all their sin. Remember, sin is loathsome in the sight of God.

So how did God cover their sin? And the biblical response is, By making atonement. And this, of course, refers to the biblical doctrine of atonement.

[16 : 09] God covers sin through the blood of a sacrifice. In the Old Testament, it was the blood of bulls and of goats that was sprinkled. In the New Testament, the writer of the letter to the Hebrews reminds us, It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.

How then is sin to be removed and covered? Is it not through the sacrifice of Christ himself? And that is powerfully set before us by John the Baptist in his preaching.

Behold, he says, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. But there is more implied in this act of covering than just the removal of sin.

If this psalm refers to the return of the people from captivity, You remember another of the prophets who prophesied around that time was Zechariah.

And he was given visions to encourage the people. In fact, if my memory serves me right, he was given eight visions.

[17 : 23] And all of these visions were received in one night. It must have been some night. Probably a night he never forgot.

Eight visions in one night. And among the visions that he received was that of Joshua the high priest. And you remember Joshua is portrayed as one who is polluted by Israel's sin.

It's a most unflattering portrayal of the high priest. Now Joshua was standing before the angel clothed with filthy garments.

Without entering into that part of scripture, remember how an instruction was given. Remove the filthy garments from him.

And the angel. Who is the angel? The pre-incarnate Christ. He goes on to state, Behold, I have taken your iniquity away from me. I will clothe you with pure vestments.

[18 : 26] Remember, no one has the power to forgive sin but God alone. Even the enemies of Christ during his earthly ministry could agree on that point. The implication of clothing being that the righteousness of Christ is imputed to the high priest.

So that covering means not just the removal of sin, but the clothing that appropriately covers the sin-born nakedness of the sinner before God.

And did you notice the small word in the phrase, beginning thou hast covered. Thou hast covered all their sin. How very important that little word all is.

And how profoundly grateful every person in Christ tonight ought to be for what God has done. I think it was Spurgeon who wrote something like this.

All of it. In other words, all of you sin. Every spot and wrinkle. The veil of love has covered it all. And the apostle John certainly, clearly sets that before us in his first letter when he writes, The blood of Jesus Christ, or of Jesus' Son, cleanses us from all sin.

[20 : 00] Oh, how precious and encouraging to every child of grace to know that you are cleansed from all sin.

From all sin. And you know, it seems to me that you can almost hear the note of deep, joyous thanksgiving that is in the heart of the psalmist as he reflects and remembers what God has done in the past.

Thou hast forgiven the iniquity of thy, thou hast covered all their sins. Sin is a serious matter. And the great danger is that we are tempted to think of sin lightly.

And if that is a temptation, just reflect momentarily on the one who had to die in order for your sin and my sins to be forgiven.

And that will help you to see the weightiness, the gravity and the seriousness of sin.

[21 : 19] As you reflect as you reflect as a believer on the work of salvation, you see the Son of God in our nature. The beloved Son of God on the cursed cross.

He had to experience death in all its intensity and bitterness in order for your sin and my sin to be forgiven.

We ought to recognize on the one hand, how great our sin is. How terrible our sin. And on the other hand, recognize the greatness, the superlative greatness of the Father's love in the giving of his Son.

And more we ought to see the love of the Son in the giving of himself for sinners. And for Paul, it was a staggering thought.

And a constant stimulus to his faith. The life, he says, I now live in the flesh. I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me.

[22 : 36] Now, in this psalm, here were a people who deserved to be in captivity for their strength from God. Yet God, in his infinitely great mercy, removing all their iniquity, granting forgiveness and restoring them to their former land.

The psalmist looks back. And so, I believe, does the New Testament believer look back to the finished work of Christ and rejoices in what God and Christ has done.

What did God actually do? Well, let's let the Word speak by way of response.

Remember this person. This unointed person who was condemned was perfect in every aspect of his life. The testimony of the Bible in the Old Testament is he had done no violence, neither was there deceit in his mouth.

The perfect God-man. And Peter reaffirms that in his New Testament first letter. He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. His character was without reproach.

[23 : 58] His character was without reproach. And yet, despite such flawless, perfect character, so not even the scrutiny of a holy God, could find cause for reproach.

We read, yet or but it was the will of the Lord to crush him. He has put him to grief. And that little word, yet or but.

It's as if it were lifting the edge of a curtain that hides from our sight the purpose of God.

And that lifts the curtain in such a sense that we see a little of the purpose of God. That enables us to understand matters that are hidden.

This is how God purposed to save his people. The son was crushed and put to grief. The perfect, obedient servant received no protection from or lessening of the penalty, despite his sinless perfect state.

[25 : 11] The debt must be wholly paid. As he himself reminds his Emmaus Road listeners, those travel companions whom he joined on the road.

Was it not necessary that Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory? If that had not been the case, not one of us could ever have escaped being crushed by a holy God.

And so, I am persuaded that the Lord's people will never tire of reflecting on what God in Christ has done to secure your salvation.

So, that not only do you value the forgiveness that is bestowed, but you value the blood that was shed to bestow forgiveness.

And even more, you value the person who shed his blood in order that that forgiveness be yours. But there is something more spoken of in these verses, and that is that propitiation was made.

[26 : 25] Thou hast taken away all thy wrath, thou hast turned thyself from the fierceness of thine anger. The wrath of God is turned aside.

Because God's justice is appeased in Christ. And there was, I don't know if you're familiar with a commentator by the name of William Plummer.

And he, in his commentary on this psalm, he asked a series of questions.

And the questions went something like this, How can God be just and justify the ungodly man? And, you know, that's the very question that the Apostle Paul seeks to address in his letter to the Romans.

Paul is actually answering that question. How can God be just and justify the ungodly man? That is the theme of the early chapters of that letter to the Romans.

[27 : 40] But Plummer also asked, How can God condemn sin and yet let the sinner go free? How can God declare and manifest his awful righteousness and yet be righteous and bestowing life on the guilty?

How can God magnify the law and make it honourable while yet its penalty is not borne by transgressors but by their voluntary substitute?

And he went on to write, These are but a few of the hard problems that find their solution in the cross of Christ.

And then he wrote what I consider to be most interesting and instructive. And this is what he wrote. For fifty years he said, I have been hearing and reading good discourses or sermons on this theme.

Yet it is as fresh and delightful as ever. I thought that was wonderful. Here is a man for fifty years, But his appetite has not shrunk.

[28 : 55] He takes as much delight at the end of these fifty years as he took initially in the theme of Christ and him crucified.

And then he went on to say, All that I may see into it better before I die And infinitely better after I die.

Because he expected that his understanding would be illuminated more when he entered into the eternal state.

Well, can you follow that? With regard to the preciousness that William Plummer attached to the work of atonement in the life of Christ.

And one other thing that is worth noting from these verses of remembrance. Did you notice how the psalmist gives the glory to God alone in restoring Jerusalem?

[29 : 59] Note how God is the subject of every sentence. Lord, thou hast been favorable. And so on. He's not given the glory for anything that has taken place to anything in the life of man.

To the prophets for their teaching, for their encouragement. The glory belongs solely to God. And just as surely as the psalmist boasts in God and what he has done, so must the believer to the present hour.

Was that not also where the apostle Paul saw grounds for boasting? Far be it from me to boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Well, the psalmist remembers God's grace in the past. And that brings me to my second thought. The time is going. He resorts to God in the present. The remembrance of the past is an encouragement.

But even more, it gives boldness in the present. To present to petition before God, the God of great grace. And so he prays in the present, Turn us, O God, of our salvation.

[31 : 21] Will thou not revive us again? Show us thy mercy. And the word turn in the original has implied in it to turn in repentance.

They recognize that they have been chastened for their unfaithfulness. And so the psalmist resorts to the Lord as the only hope of salvation and deliverance.

Despite being restored to the land, he recognizes the continuing need for repentance. And so he turns to the Lord. And that in and of itself is an act that is prompted by God.

Nobody turns to God of their own volition unless God is at work in their lives. God has to bring about that turning to himself.

And repentance, perhaps it is beneficial to remind ourselves how the reformers, how they answered the question, what is repentance unto life?

[32 : 32] A saving grace went by a sinner out of a true sense of his sin, apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ, of the grief and hatred of his sin, turned from it unto God and endeavored afterwards. A new obedience.

We need to be empowered by God to repent. You know, sometimes you get the impression that repentance is but a one-off thing. That's not the biblical view of repentance.

Repentance ought to be a continuous factor in the lives of believers. there are always sins in my life and yours that need to be repented of.

In fact, I would suggest that faith cannot exist where there is no repentance. It's like two sides of the same coin.

And what comes across to me here is this, that the psalmist is representing a people who have lost the joy of salvation through their sin.

[33 : 39] I already referred to what, how David was praying, restore to me the joy of your salvation. You see, you can have a faith relationship and that joy would be missing because of the waywardness or your disobedience.

It may be even something like happened in the days of which the prophet Joel prophesied. You remember in that day the nation was afflicted by a terrible plague of locusts because of how they turned away from God.

And not Joel not only tells us that this is a judgmental act of God upon the people but there is a sense in which it is a warning about judgment to come in the end days.

Yet in the midst of judgment God promises through the prophet in the days of Joel if the people repent I will restore it's a wonderful text I will restore to you the years that the swarming locusts has eaten the hopper the destroyer the cutter my great army which I sent shall eat in plenty and be satisfied and praise the name of your Lord your God who has dealt wondrously with you.

Now I don't know but if I were to speak personally I would have to confess that there are locusts eaten years in my life I don't know is that true of you years where you feel there was no spiritual fruit you see it's in the nature of sin to cause the loss of many blessings and you cannot regain the lost years the years of little or no growth and yet here is this wonderful God of grace in his great mercy granting new blessings I will restore I will restore to you the years that have been eaten by the locust there is a need for repentance and so the key to repentance is to seek the grace of God through Jesus

[36 : 21] Christ well the grace of God Paul writes to Titus has appeared bringing salvation for all people training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions to live self-controlled upright and God lives in the present age and then the psalmist goes on to pose a question not only does he ask for quickening and revival will thou be angry with us forever will thou draw out thine anger to all generations others it's as if the psalmist to say that he won't be satisfied until the Lord brings back his people again and until he deals with them again as he dealt with them in the past graciously and lovingly restoring because the word revive it implies that life already there doesn't it you cannot revive someone who literally is dead but where there is a pulse of life you seek to revive and however feeble the pulse of spiritual life might be it requires to be stirred up and this man the psalmist saw that need will thou not us revive us again and that revival has to begin not outside the church but within the church within the body of believers that's where it has to begin to spread to the community before it spreads to the unconverted and if there was a need for that prayer in the day of the psalmist is there not just as great a need in our 21st century world for this prayer of revival in a day where you might say we're in a spiritual night where we need the breathing of the

Holy Spirit to bring about quickening and the lives of many who are today dead in trespasses and sinned who need the power of the Holy Spirit bringing home to them their lost state in order for them to turn to God and the psalmist tells why he seeks revival it is so that thy people may rejoice in thee you see holiness produces happiness happiness in the Lord there is no discontent in glory where people are perfectly holy there is only eternal happiness holiness produces happiness and it comes from knowing more closely the love of God and drinking more deeply from the wells of salvation so the psalmist prays show us thy mercy

O Lord and grant us thy salvation the closer we get to the Lord in prayer and the more conformed we are to his holy character the less we will complain and the more we will rejoice you remember the description of Israel of old happy art thou O Israel who is like you a people saved by the Lord well the psalmist directs us to God and to God alone because of his promises and his actions he wants us to flee to God for refuge and is that not what the man of God learned in another situation when he says

I will sing of your strength I will sing aloud of your steadfast love in the morning for you have been a fortress and a refuge in the day of my distress can you say that too looking to him because of who he is the God who is merciful and gracious slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness the God who says he has no pleasure in the death of the wicked that the wicked turn from his way and live the psalmist resorts to God God is his hope he's not saying I have to do better he's not saying anything like that he is saying God alone is my hope and so he resorts to God you are the source of my hope because salvation is found in none of he remembers

God's grace in the past he resorts to God in the present let us pray O eternal God how great thou art how gracious thou art how merciful thou art how loving in thy dealings with unworthy and undeserving and yes frequently ungrateful sinners O help us to look to thee in remembering the past help us to resort in the present to the great God who alone is able to quicken and to revive and renew and the glory shall be thine in Jesus name we ask it amen let us conclude by singing to his praise from

[43 : 41] Psalm 126 Psalm 126 tells the psalmist telling of the experience of God's people and their bondage was turned around and Zion's bondage God turned back as men that dreamed were we then filled with laughter was our mouth our tongue with melody they among the heathen said the Lord great things for them hath wrought the Lord hath done great things for us whence joy to us is brought let us sing the whole song and Zion's bondage God turned back God and Zion's bondage God turned by our past men that dreamed well we then filled with laughter was our mouth heart and with melody among the heathen said the

Lord great things for them have wrought the Lord hath done great things for us whence joy to us is brought as streams of water in the sound upon his glory call his soul in tears tears have we been tied of joy enjoy the show that man who bid in precious seed in glory in fort the morn he he doubtless he hid back his shees rejoice he shall return return now may the grace of the

Lord Jesus Christ the love of God the Father fellowship and communion of the Holy Spirit rest on and abide with you all now and forever amen tres of damn he h how m ho