

Life Assurance: Gimme Shelter - 2nd October 2022

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Preacher: Matt Wallace

[0 : 00] So this morning, we're continuing this Sunday series, which we've been doing in recent weeks, called Life Assurance, exploring the ways in which we might know a greater sense of assurance in life as we journey through it with God and with each other.

So last week, for example, if you were here with us or you've caught up online, we looked at how God gives assurance through encouraging us to be physically present with one another, finding support from God through each other, support which I know as we continue to process and grieve the loss of our friend Sue, on top of all the other ongoing concerns of life, that support is more crucial than ever for us in times as tough as we're going through.

And yet I'm aware that in the tougher times, there sometimes comes a point where we might feel so overwhelmed with stuff, so knocked about by the storms that we're experiencing, where it just seems to be one thing happening after another, that we just long for some respite, some shelter from those storms.

A shelter which offers us the chance to take cover, to take stock, even just to take a breath from whatever might be coming next. I mean, you know those times when you're just getting so drenched in the rain, it was tipping down on Friday afternoon, wasn't it?

It was one of those days that anywhere undercover, when it's absolutely tipping down, we'll do a tree, a bus stop, a shop doorway, even a stranger's umbrella, you kind of try and sneak underneath perhaps when you're walking around, you're just desperate to escape the deluge of rain coming.

[1 : 44] I guess it's that kind of feeling, but about life itself, where we feel that unless we can find some shelter from the storm, then we're not quite sure how much more of the storms that we can take.

And this morning, well, this morning, what I'd like us to do is explore this idea of shelter in relation to God's assurance for our lives.

Because as we go through the Bible, the idea of God being a source of shelter for us, well, it crops up time and time again. So for example, there's this opening line in Psalm 46 which says this, it says, God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble.

Now, in the Hebrew that this was originally written in, the word we translate as refuge in that verse is this one, makaseh, or you've got to get a little huck, makaseh like that.

So, do you fancy clearing your throat with a little bit of Hebrew this morning? I know you like these ones. Let me hear you say makaseh after three. One, two, three, makaseh. Excellent. Now, that means refuge.

[2 : 59] Okay. But, interestingly, it can also be translated as shelter. And even more interestingly, it's a word which has the same Hebrew root to it as the word for trust.

So there's a lot of combinations of those three words in this one word, makaseh, indicating perhaps there's a sense of safety, of security, assurance, we might say, that comes with God providing shelter for us.

And it's an idea which is picked up in another psalm, Psalm 92, which says this, I will say of the Lord, he is my shelter and my fortress, my God, in him I will trust.

So, again, you've got trust and shelter, both in the same verse there. It seems they're intended to be taken together. And it's this combo of seeing shelter as a place to build or rebuild our trust.

Well, it finds its origins in the Bible way back in the book of Exodus. It's there, for example, if you know the story of Moses and the wilderness and all of that, we read at a time when Moses led the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt, led them into the desert, this wilderness, to escape from Pharaoh before they'd eventually find their way to the land that God had promised them, the promised land of Canaan, which eventually came to be known as Israel.

[4 : 35] Now, for all sorts of reasons, this wilderness journey is a long one anyway, but it took them some 40 years to get from Egypt to Israel. But each night, these wandering Israelites would sleep out in the open in shelters, tents that they'd put up to stay warm and protect themselves from the elements.

And you can imagine, if you're in some wilderness desert, how important these shelters were, an opportunity for rest and respite from the arduous journey that they needed to make.

Indeed, so significant is this idea of shelter in Israel's history that there's an annual festival which was set up to remember it. So we read, for example, in the book of Leviticus, this command from God.

When he says this, he says, Celebrate this as a festival to the Lord for seven days each year in the seventh month. Live in temporary shelters for seven days so your descendants will know that I had the Israelites live in temporary shelters when I brought them out of Egypt.

You know, in some ways, it's the kind of original Glastonbury, I suppose. I don't know if they had main stage and food vans and all that, but it's a proper camping festival in mind, it seems, which becomes known in time as the Feast of Tabernacles.

[5 : 58] Tabernacle being another word for shelter or Sukkot, to give it its Hebrew name. Now this Sukkot, this festival of shelters, celebrated by Jews to this day.

Indeed, it takes place for a week from next weekend. So if you fancy an excuse to go camping or glamping by the looks of it, maybe this is the time to do it.

That's all the background for this shelter stuff. But why might this talk of ancient shelters, why might that be relevant for us today in our lives?

Well, it seems to me that since God called his people to remember and to indeed celebrate the shelter they took from their pretty tough wilderness wanderings, I'd say it's God's way of saying to us, look, I get it that sometimes life is so tough that you need to retreat, that you need to step back for a while.

You need to take refuge, to take shelter, because it's actually in those sheltered times that your trust in me will be restored and renewed.

[7 : 16] I guess we could call it divine permission, divine encouragement, even a divine command to seek shelter when we know, when we sense that we're in danger of being overwhelmed by the stuff of life.

Now we're talking a bit about what taking shelter might look like for each of us. But I guess a question worth considering before that would be this, would be how do we know when we're close to being overwhelmed?

How do we know when actually we're on the verge of being overwhelmed? I guess we sense perhaps that we know this instinctively, but it seems to me that in some ways our capacity to cope is often far greater than we give ourselves credit for.

One of the privileges of being in my position as vicar is that I get to know a fair bit about a lot of us, not in some kind of weird stalkery kind of way, but just people just share stuff with me.

And as I pick up information and hear stories from people, I've got to say I'm often in awe of the resilience that I see displayed in so many of our lives.

[8 : 36] It's a resilience which I can only describe, I think, as a God-given strength to get through certain situations. Because it's a strength which when I see it displayed, I think it's one of the things which moves me more than most things in life.

When I see someone who I know their story is incredibly complicated, when I see them on a Sunday, for example, worshipping God in the midst of all that trouble and strife, then I find I well up because I get quite emotional about the fact that I know they're digging deep and I can see that in them, knowing their story.

So I guess what I want to say first of all is be encouraged because I think through God we're stronger and more resilient than perhaps we might realise we are. But having said that, in other ways, I also wouldn't be surprised if a good number of us, perhaps even most of us, feel pretty close to the edge more often than we might care to admit.

And I take a bit of a risk this morning, I suppose. In the spirit of openness, I'm going to share where I've been at for the past few months, even past couple of years, because I guess if I'm honest, for much of these recent times, I know in myself I've been feeling pretty overwhelmed by all sorts of things, but that's left me with quite a deep sense of gloom about life.

I mean, more generally, I think I've, aside from recent times, I think I've probably struggled with balance of depression on and off for most of my adult life.

[10:27] Never been clinically diagnosed or prescribed medication or had therapy for it, so whether it can actually be described as depression or not, I don't know. And I wouldn't want to prescribe it of myself.

But there have been definitely times when there's a lowness that I feel. Could be depression. It's never been diagnosed, as I say, but it sounds pretty similar.

Times when I feel pretty listless, times where I don't want to engage with people, times when I struggle to find anything in life which gives me pleasure or brings me joy in things.

Now, for me, I know these bouts of lowness, you know, ask Gemma, they don't always make me easy to live with. Sometimes I kind of just check out of being in company, I suppose.

They make me difficult sometimes to work with, even maintain a friendship with. But when I seem to lose my spark, it can take me a while to find it again.

[11:37] And I say, if I'm honest, I feel for much of these recent months, if not for the last couple of years, I know I've been missing a little bit of my spark, should we say.

Now, over the years, I've worked out that if I begin to eat better, if I begin to drink less, if I get out walking in the sunshine, if I get earlier nights, if I visit new places and so on. These are all things which usually help to lift me out of whatever slump I'm in.

And in doing so, they keep the sort of lower times at bay. And yet, what's been different, I suppose, recently, and what's been frustrating in recent months for me, is that even though I seem to have been in a bit of a mental low for a while now, the usual things I've been trying to do to combat that, the usual things I would do to combat that, exercise, diet, drinking less, and so on, they haven't really worked.

They haven't really lifted me out of that slump in a way that I would usually hope they would. And so knowing that's where I am, or certainly have been, and partly wanting to try and overcome this sense of gloom for myself, but also because I feel a responsibility to you as well to work through it. I feel a responsibility to my family and ultimately to God to do my best to live this life in a way which honours the gift that it is. I've been thinking and talking with God a lot about this, on why this kind of almost persistent gloom has been there, and what I can do about it, I suppose.

[13:22] And it's taken me a while, as I say, it's probably a couple of years, to put my finger on it. But I read an article the other week, which my dad sent through to me, actually, which, when I read it, I thought, yeah, that's it.

That helps explain things. That's probably why I've been feeling the way I have. And it's an article on mental health, which was written by a clinical psychologist called Dr. Sana Hassan.

And it's worth reading in full if you can. I'll put a link on the YouTube video and on Facebook when this recording goes out. But the gist of her article said this.

She says, as a country, we're reckoned to be experiencing something of a mental health crisis. So there are some 1.6 million people currently on waiting lists for mental health care, and it's reckoned a further 8 million people who are awaiting assessments but can't even get on these lists.

And she says, the assumption is that these millions of people are representative of a wave of depression which has arisen, primarily, it seems, as a result of all of our lockdown experiences.

[14:45] And so if this mental health crisis, as it's called, if it is depression that people are struggling with, I guess by definition, the reason for that depression lies within us.

You know, depression is an internal problem which is best treated through therapy, through medication, through working harder in some ways to achieve a better sense of balance in life.

All a bit like me thinking that exercise, diet, and sobriety will solve my sense of gloom. And yet what this clinical psychologist, Dr. Hassan, says is that in her profession, what she's seeing in a lot of people is not actually internal depression, but rather a perfectly rational reaction to external trauma.

It's not internal depression, it's a reaction to external trauma. And that means that the mental distress, the lowness, the gloom, the heaviness, certain I've been feeling and I'm sure other of us have too, it's not necessarily because something is out of whack.

It's skewed within us. But rather it seems we're feeling those things because we're probably acutely aware that there's something wrong externally.

[16:13] We could say there's something wrong with the world. Now what might this external trauma be? Well, where to begin? Because you'll know as well as me, there's been the COVID

pandemic with all of its associated issues, got a climate emergency and the out of control pollution, which is leading to environmental collapse.

You've got the food shortages that come with climate change, which have been exacerbated by Putin's invasion of Ukraine, which has also caused utility costs to skyrocket, all of which contributes to the cost of living crisis and the fuel and food poverty we're facing.

Now couple that with huge inflation, rising interest rates, growing inequality, post-Brexit labour shortages, wide-scale, high-level corruption, a cripplingly underfunded health service, and then a new Prime Minister and Chancellor whose uncoded mini-budget nearly crashed our economy and wiped out pensions this week.

It's wave upon wave upon wave. So it's fair to say, wherever way we look at it, these are indeed traumatic times in which we're living.

And so as a result of that, it's no wonder if our mental health is struggling and there's a weighty heaviness for so many of us.

[17 : 38] No wonder in that case that I've been feeling gloomy as I follow all this stuff. And yet understanding for me that this particular gloominess is probably prompted by external trauma and not internal depression in this instance.

Well that for me has been hugely liberating. And it's liberating because to get back to this idea of shelter, I think I'm realising that what I need to recover my absent spark is not to beat myself up that my brain is broken, but simply to find shelter and to find respite and to find refreshment so that even in the midst of all this external stuff that's going on, I learn how to renew my trust in God above all to see us through whatever circumstances arise.

And this idea of shelter being somewhere that renews and restores our trust in God. Well my hunch is that that's what helps us to know what kind of shelter we might need in the face of whatever we might be struggling to cope with.

So I think for me, maybe for you, finding shelter might be something as simple as switching off our phones and not constantly doom-scrolling from one bad news story to the next.

Turning off the news for a day, which I would find hard, actually it's not head in the sand, escapist denying that the bad stuff is happening.

[19 : 28] Rather it's a self-protecting, sensible decision to take a break from being digitally drenched by so much distress.

You know, that might be the simple but profound temporary shelter we need because in that digital silence we and I may just give God the space to speak assurance and hope into our lives.

Alternatively, a place of shelter for us may mean that we intentionally take time to enjoy being in nature. you know, to intentionally explore a place of beauty or calm but to do so in deliberate conversation with God as we explore.

You know, it's that Psalm 23 idea of God leading us beside quiet waters in order to restore our soul. It's a way for us to be reminded that we're part of something much bigger and actually much more beautiful.

A much bigger and more beautiful world. A bigger and more beautiful God. A way for us perhaps to have our perspective realigned, shall we say.

[20 : 43] What else? Well, taking shelter might mean we deliberately offer to do something which helps us feel productive in helping others. Especially when there's so much dodgy stuff going on in the world that is way beyond our control or our influence.

so that might mean getting stuck into helping out at a church or community group. Put your name down on a clipboard. It might mean doing a litter pick. It might mean babysitting someone's kids, even taking a neighbour's dog for a walk.

Not only will doing stuff for no other reason than to help others give the people we help a chance for respite, it also helps us in the helping because we begin to feel useful and productive.

And in these small but significant ways, I suspect God will be trying to speak to us, reminding us of all of the small but significant ways in which we can know his provision, his help.

The myriad of things that we can still be grateful for in the midst of all the toughness. Then again, taking shelter.

[21 : 54] It might involve us having the courage to ask for help, whether that's with money or childcare, loneliness, work, grief, addictions, relationships, whatever area of life that's threatening to perhaps overwhelm us.

It's in asking for and receiving help that the shelter works because our trust in God to provide will be restored. And I've said before and I'll keep saying it as the weeks go on, if you're in need, please come and talk to us.

Speak to me or Ruth or find someone who can talk to us on your behalf if you're a bit shy because help in a range of ways is definitely available and that's what we're here for, to help those of us who need help in whatever way that is.

We'll do our best to help. equally though, taking shelter just as that Jewish festival known as the Feast of the Tabernacles was, it might mean deliberately, intentionally taking time to celebrate what is good and what remains good in life and not allowing troubles to steal our joy.

Now that celebration could be family based if you're blessed with that, could be friends based, but as a church, I know there's a way in which we are family and certainly friends with each other.

[23 : 21] We've got the quiz night coming up, there's pub club, going to have a big New Year's Eve party here as well again this year which I'm already looking forward to. Always for us to celebrate being together and again, do come and see us.

If you can't afford a ticket or money for a night out, we'd love to help you find the shelter of being able to celebrate what's good in life.

But one final angle on this idea of shelters and celebration though because it's interesting to note that in John's gospel we read of Jesus himself taking part in this feast of tabernacles, this festival of shelters in his day.

Celebration which at the time centered all around at the temple in Jerusalem. as part of these week-long celebrations, there'd be all sorts of rituals which would take place.

One of which would involve the high priest of the temple making a big show of carrying a golden jug of water through the temple courts before pouring it out over the altar in the temple in the sanctuary area there.

[24 : 36] I guess it's his way of symbolically thanking God for the provision and refreshment that God brings. So it's water-based thanksgiving to God.

And yet in John's gospel we read that at this time of the festival we see Jesus doing this. On the last and greatest day of the festival Jesus stood and said in a loud voice let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink.

Whoever believes in me as scripture has said rivers of living water will flow from within them. By this he meant the spirit whom those who believed in him were later to receive.

Up to that time the spirit had not been given since Jesus had not yet been glorified. On hearing his words some of the people said surely this man is the prophet.

Others said he is the Messiah. You see at this festival of shelters where trust in God's provision was celebrated and renewed. It's here that Jesus declares that he himself is the source of all that is good.

[26 : 03] The source of living water which gives us the refreshment we need knowing that as we face the future we do so with the spirit of God living inside us.

The good news and I'll finish with this the good news is that with the spirit with God's presence in us we carry that sense of divine shelter with us all the time.

Now yes we might need to intentionally seek shelter from time to time in some of the ways we've thought about but as that psalm that we opened with Psalm 46 says God is our shelter God is our shelter so I guess my prayer for myself and my prayer for each of us is that we may take cover that we might take comfort and that we may take courage from the fact that God our shelter is always with us.

Amen. Amen.