

Reflecting on the Psalms - 12th September 2021

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[0 : 0 0] 1 Strength will rise as we wait upon the Lord 2 Strength will rise as we wait upon the Lord 3 Our God, You reign forever, our hope, our strong Deliverer 3 You are the everlasting God, the everlasting God 3 You do not faint, You once grow weary 3 Strength will rise as we wait upon the Lord 3 We will wait upon the Lord 4 We will wait upon the Lord 4 We will wait upon the Lord 4 Strength will rise as we wait upon the Lord 5 We will wait upon the Lord 5 Our God, You reign forever, our hope, our strong Deliverer 5 You are the everlasting God, the everlasting God 6 You do not faint, You once grow weary 6 You are the defender of the weak 7 You comfort those in need 8 You lift us up always like eagles 8 You are the everlasting God, the everlasting God 7 You are the everlasting God, the everlasting God 8 Our God, You reign forever, our hope, our strong Deliverer

Our strong deliverer You are the everlasting God The everlasting God You do not faint, you almost grow weary You're the defender of the weak You comfort those in need You lift us up on wings like eagles You lift us up on wings like eagles

You lift us up on wings like eagles You lift us up on wings like eagles Let's start with what we've just been singing.

That opening song we had, Everlasting God. We're in about 15 years ago now. We've sung it a lot, I guess, over the last 15 years or so here at St John's. I like it, it's a good one. Cracking words.

Bit of a modern classic, I suppose and it's a song whose words are rooted in the Bible most notably the book of Isaiah in which we read this The Lord is the everlasting God the creator of the ends of the earth He does not faint or grow weary Words which echo in that song we've just been singing.

[4 : 5 1] So if you want to write a worship song you've got a ready-made resource there, I reckon. We've got Nick lyrics from scripture left, right and centre if you fancy writing some tunes for us here that would be great. Indeed, the book of Psalms which is in the middle of the Bible it's a collection of 150 song lyrics it's a rich and varied playlist which was probably compiled over a period of about 500 years between about 1000 BC and 500 BC as different writers poetically expressed their faith in words which were and still are to this day used in sung worship and put to music.

Now what's interesting though, if you think about the Psalms and what I'd like us to think a little bit about tonight is how different Psalms have been particularly popular during different eras different time periods that we've been through as human race I mean, it's an idea which stands to reason I guess since the book of Psalms was completed about 2,500 years ago it's a long time so it stands to reason that certain Psalms would have been more popular since that time than others particularly if there were words in certain Psalms which speak into the situation that a community or a nation are going through in that generation.

So for example, biblical scholars reckon that when the book of Psalms was completed Psalm number 1 was among the most popular and the most regularly sung by worshippers for a good few centuries Now why might Psalm 1 have been top of the pops been so popular early on?

Well it's reckoned that Psalm 1 was deliberately written as a song which could be placed at the beginning of the book of Psalms It's almost as if those compiling the book of Psalms they had sort of 140-something Psalms they got together It's almost like they thought, yeah, it's good but we need a killer opening track for this album that we're releasing you know, one that will really cut through with people and so Psalm 1, it's reckoned, was one of the latest Psalms to be written and included in the book So it's a Psalm which was written to introduce everything in the book of Psalms and it's a cracker of a song I mean here's some of those lyrics It says, words which may be familiar to you The best is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers but whose delight is in the law of the Lord and who meditates on his law day and night That person is like a tree planted by streams of water which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither whatever they do prospers and it goes on after that but you can see why this was reckoned perhaps to be a good way to kick off the book of Psalms to set the tone for all that was to come for what follows

This one in particular stands out to me Blessed is the one whose delight is in the law of the Lord who meditates day and night So these Psalms were written as songs to be sung and to therefore be remembered if you put something to music it's much easier to remember I don't know about you I can remember song lyrics like that because you're singing the song I couldn't remember a poem to save my life but I can remember a song because you sing it along with the melody Same with the Psalms They were words to be remembered put to music words to think through and meditate on and just as in here with what they call the law we're describing the teaching contained in the scriptures that was also meant to be dwelt on thought through, prayed through and worked through with God about how to apply its lessons to our lives This Psalm number one goes on as we were hearing Like a tree planted by streams of water which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither I like that image I think it's a lovely prayer for us to think of a great way perhaps to set us up for following the ways of God to be deeply rooted in Him

[9 : 05] So you can see why perhaps for early centuries when the Psalms were completed perhaps from maybe the 4th century BC up to the 1st century BC it's reckoned Psalm 1 was up there as a favourite for a good many people Alright, hold that thought though because we'll come forward a little bit in time and get to the time of Jesus because we know that Jesus himself and his followers certainly those with Jewish roots knew and used the Hebrew Scriptures what we call the Old Testament all the time So the book of Psalms was therefore the early song book that the early church these early Christians used and it's reckoned alongside Psalm number one being popular and well known there was another Psalm in particular which resonated with those early followers of Jesus above perhaps any others and it's Psalm 22 Psalm 22 was one which really got them going as these early Jesus followers here's some selected verses from Psalm 22 again words which may sound familiar

My God, my God Why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me? So far from my cries of anguish? My God, I cry out by day but you do not answer by night but I find no rest all who see me mock me they hurl insults shaking their heads you trust in the Lord they say let the Lord rescue him I am poured out like water and all my bones are on display they pierce my hands and my feet people stare and gloat over me they divide my clothes among them and cast lots for my garment Now though this Psalm was written hundreds of years before Jesus and his crucifixion you'll maybe recognise some of the similarities with those words we might say prophecies in that Psalm about all that Jesus would endure on the cross indeed Jesus himself famously quoted from Psalm 22 on the cross

My God, my God why have you forsaken me? Forsaken? Why have you abandoned me? And on initial reading I guess we might assume Jesus quotes from this Psalm out of desperation you know its words as we were reading summing up how he felt emotionally spiritually physically abandoned forsaken by God left to die this most lonely and horrific of deaths and yet in quoting from this Psalm Jesus knew Jesus knew I think not just the pain that those opening verses express and highlight but also I think he's quoting it because remarkably he knew the hope that Psalm 22 conveys as well so that's the sort of famous part of Psalm 22 that we might have thought about on Good Friday and so on here's how Psalm 22 continues some verses from it but you Lord do not be far from me you are my strength come quickly to help me

I will declare your name to my people in the assembly I will praise you for he has not despised or scorned the suffering of the afflicted one he has not hidden his face from him but has listened to his cry for help the poor will eat and be satisfied those who seek the Lord will praise him may your hearts live forever all the ends of the earth will remember and turn to the Lord they will proclaim his righteousness declaring to a people yet unborn he has done it it's a lot more positive when you read the whole Psalm rather than just dwelling on the first line one of the Jewish things that was common when you quote the first line of a Psalm Jewish listeners would have known ah he means the whole Psalm it's kind of like a shorthand brief way of summarising what the whole Psalm was about and Psalm 22 it's not therefore a Psalm of defeat you know my God where are you but rather it's a Psalm of triumph you know he has done it is the final line that's an emphasis

I would suggest that Jesus' final words from the cross it is finished in essence reflect you know it is finished says Jesus in other words I've done it he's done it he's done it God's done it and so it seems perhaps because of both the way that Psalm 22 not only references the crucifixion we're not denying the pain of that in that Psalm but it also celebrates the triumph of God in the resurrection life through Jesus and hope we have because of that that seems why the early Christians made Psalm 22 one of the most popular ones for them all yes they were enduring persecution at the time they knew some of that pain themselves but they knew ultimately their hope was in the risen Jesus now in terms of time it's reckoned that Psalm 22 endured as a favourite Psalm of the early church for centuries and it was only hundreds of years after Jesus from the middle ages into medieval times that another Psalm overtook it in the popularity stakes with believers another Psalm and this was Psalm 51 now why Psalm 51 why did that suddenly gain popularity well Psalm 51 is a real psalm of repentance of penitence originally written so it's reckoned by

[14 : 44] David the king of Israel after he committed adultery with a woman called Bathsheba and we'll read a bit of what Psalm 51 says so we get the tone of it it says this written by David have mercy on me oh God according to your unfailing love according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin for I know my transgressions and my sin is always before me against you you only have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight so you are right so you are right in your verdict and justified when you judge and he continues create in me a pure heart oh God and renew a steadfast spirit within me do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit to sustain me my sacrifice oh God is a broken spirit a broken and contrite heart you God will not despise now

Psalm 51 it's another I mean every Psalm's great that's another classic incredibly valuable I think too as it gives us an insight into what true repentance I don't always find repentance comes easily rather than just sorry God I've messed up again that's far more poetic sort of expansive way of saying sorry for things maybe that's why people have used it over centuries but to give their prayer life a shape when they want to say heartfelt sorry to God and yet why might this Psalm have been particularly popular in the Middle Ages and medieval times a bit of a generalisation but faith in God as expressed in those Middle Ages centuries was often dominated by feelings of immense guilt and impending judgement this sense of being I don't know a worthless worm you know in desperate need of God's undeserved favour and this this sense of shame at sin which is a legit aspect that sense of we know we've done wrong of our relationship with God is not however meant to be the defining thing about us in God's eyes and yet the shame and guilt that was often used by those in power in order to keep the common people down well that seems to be tied in perhaps with why this Psalm became popular because if you emphasise people's sin and guilt you're more likely to be able to control them through fear of what's going to happen if they continue to step out of line that's interesting this Psalm's popularity it coincides when

Dante's Inferno and all that hell stuff was going on in terms of people's consciousness fascination with that idea but where sadly I think it seems that many people place their faith in God not because of the joy of heaven or the blessing of having a relationship with him but simply because they were afraid of where they might end up if they didn't fear of hell rather than joy of heaven if you like defined their faith as I say Psalm 51 it's in the Bible it's a great Psalm it's full of humility but I hope in medieval times as with now it can be seen in the light of other Psalms which also proclaim alongside that sense of being repentant you know the grace and the love and the goodness of God not seeing our sins as things which define us let's let's just pause for a moment play almost encountering that Psalm 51 we're going to play a worship song which speaks of this grace yes we know we need to repent and penitence is part of our way of relating to God but it's underpinned and surrounded by the grace of God and so we're going to play a song which is rooted in another Psalm

Psalm 103 and as this plays you might want to sing along if you want if you do stick a mask on but you might just want to let it play out and listen to it but let's allow these ancient words in this worship song to feed our own faith in our God who yet is holy but who is also full of grace and love it's the song the Lord is gracious and compassionate the Lord is gracious and compassionate slow to anger and rich in love the Lord is good too he has compassion on all that he has made as far as the east is from the west that's how far he has removed our transgressions from us as far as the east is from the west that's how far he has removed our transgressions from us as far as the east is from the west that's how far he has removed our transgressions from us the Lord is gracious and compassionate so to anger and rich in love the Lord is gracious and compassionate so to anger and rich in love the Lord is gracious and compassionate so to anger and rich in love the Lord is good to all he has compassion on all that he has made as far as the east is from the west that's how far he has removed our transgressions from us as far as the east is from the west that's how far he has removed our transgressions from us praise the Lord all my soul praise the Lord praise the Lord all my soul praise the Lord

Praise the Lord, O my soul Praise the Lord Praise the Lord, O my soul Praise the Lord As far as the east is from the west That's how far He has removed the transgressions from us As far as the east is from the west That's how far He has removed the transgressions from us And praise the Lord, O my soul

[23 : 19] Praise the Lord Praise the Lord, O my soul Praise the Lord Praise the Lord O my soul Praise the Lord Praise the Lord O my soul Praise the Lord I love that song.

And I love it that it was written, what, two and a half, 2,800 years ago? Something like that. When people believed in a flat earth. And so for them, the idea of the east being as far as the west is, you know, God's removed our sins from us.

It's not like we would think east and west. Well, we know they joined up, really. Actually, in those days, they knew it was as far as you could get. And they didn't even know how far that would be, sort of going off into infinity in their beliefs.

So, yeah, the ancient mindset coming through there adds extra value to me in what those words declare. So there's hope, there's positivity, there's assurance in the psalm, especially that Psalm 103.

And we've already seen how Psalms 1, 22 and 51 were popular with different people at different times for different reasons. One last psalm, though, to bring us up to the present day.

[25 : 04] As really from the 17th century or so, there was one psalm above all others which has been the most loved. You know, if you had these Channel 5 countdowns of top psalms of all time kind of thing.

This would be number one for our day and age. I think you can probably guess it if you know your psalms. Psalm 23, the one which starts, the Lord's my shepherd. And here it is.

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside quiet waters.

He restores my soul. He leads me in passive righteousness for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me.

Your rod and your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil. My cup overflows.

[26 : 06] Surely, goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life. And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Classic. Classic words there. I've got a privilege of reading that. I reckon every other week of my life in a funeral that I take, it's the one that people always request because it's so popular these days.

And I guess we can take an educated guess as to why they've proved, or this psalm has proved to be so popular in modern times. I mean, some would say those words from Psalm 23, you know, they tap into modern sensibilities because perhaps in our age of individualism, we resonate more easily with a psalm written from an individual's perspective.

You know, the Lord's my shepherd. It's about us personally, and that's our day and age, perhaps. And yeah, I think that understanding of why we're popular is a bit cynical, really, because above all, I'd say people have found this psalm to be one which gives them immense comfort, particularly over recent centuries in which life has changed at such a pace and to such a degree that we long to know the guidance and the security and the peace which comes from having God, from having the Lord as our shepherd, you know, leading us through, providing for our needs, helping us, inspiring us.

Not simply as individual sheep. You don't get individual sheep. If you watch Clarkson's farm on Amazon, you'll know they're meant to be a flock. We are part of the flock. It's not an individual psalm. Shepherd hasn't got just one sheep.

[27 : 48] We know we're part of a flock, his flock, part of that community to which we belong under him. It strikes me, I think, that in these tough times that we've been through and to a large extent are still living with, I wouldn't be surprised if Psalm 23 remains a particularly important and popular psalm going forward.

As I don't know about you, but I need that reassurance of knowing the Lord as my shepherd, of knowing Jesus as our good shepherd, leading us as sheep who know his name, who recognize his voice, and ultimately trust him to guide us to the greener pastures of sustenance that we know we need to thrive in this life with God and with each other.

And so, just by way of helping us perhaps to use that psalm for our own prayers tonight, I'm just going to read through it again slowly.

You can focus on the screen if you want, if that's helpful, that picture. But as I read through it, if you want to close your eyes, it will knock this up to you. The courage you may be to allow God to lead your imagination, your meditation if you like, on the ways in which God, through Jesus and by the power of the Spirit, is our shepherd.

You might come tonight with, I don't know what's on your plate. I know some of you have got a huge amount on your plates at the moment. You might have specifics though, which only you know and only God knows. He's our shepherd. He can guide us through those times.

[29 : 24] So maybe bring those things to mind, maybe bring people to mind who you know need that guidance, that assurance today. I'll read through it again slowly. And let's use this as a sort of meditative prayer.

The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures.

He leads me beside quiet waters. He restores my soul.

He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me.

Your rod and your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.

[31 : 02] You anoint my head with oil. My cup overflows.

Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life. And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

And so as we sit, perhaps just recall one of those images, perhaps, that came to mind as we were reading through that psalm again.

What mental picture resonated most strongly with you? Which one did you want me not to move on from when I was reading? Which one do you want to go back to and revisit?

The green pastures, the quiet waters, that valley of shadow of death, but you know God's with you. Your cup overflowing. Just ask God to bring to mind that one which you know is right for you at the moment.

[32 : 26] And in the quiet, we'll just give a couple of minutes silence to think that one through with God. What is it about that picture that resonated with your situation? What is it about that picture that resonated with your situation?

What is it about that picture that resonated with your situation?

And so as we focus on you, and whatever it is you've given us tonight, even if we're feeling a bit blank at the moment, that's okay.

You're still there in that uncertainty that we might be feeling. But if we've got something specific in our mind that has been helpful for us tonight, would you sort of pin that on our minds going forward into tomorrow, we pray.

That when we wake up in the morning, it might be something which springs to mind to encourage us to know that the God of the peace here tonight is the same God.

[33 : 44] You are the same God who is there in the busyness, perhaps, of tomorrow, the work of tomorrow, the challenges, whatever tomorrow will bring. May we take that same peace, that same assurance with us that hopefully we're feeling tonight.

And may that define, perhaps, how we relate to you, how we hold ourselves with others going into the week ahead. And Lord, we do want to just bring to mind perhaps those known to us, whether it's family, friends, colleagues, neighbours, who we care about, those who perhaps need a fresh burst of your healing, your hope, your assurance, your encouragement, your provision, whatever it is, Lord.

And so just in the quiet, we picture perhaps the face of that person who has come to mind who we would long just to lift up to you and ask for you to meet with and bless in the way you can.

And Lord, as we hold that special person, perhaps those special people, before you, can you help us over the coming days to connect the two things we've been thinking about?

So yes, we want you to help us and be our source of peace, of hope, whatever it is we need from you. But at the same time, as you bless us, may you enable us to be a blessing to that person we've been thinking of.

[35 : 31] Give us the prompt over the coming days. If we live with them, to be patient and kind. If we don't live with them, to give them a call, to pop and see them, to write them a note, send them a message.

Find a way for us, please, to encourage and share the fact that they've been on our mind and our heart with you tonight. Keep us looking outward, we pray.

But keep on restoring and refreshing what's inward. In us too, we ask. And in all these things, we pray in the name of Jesus, the Good Shepherd.

Amen. Amen. So one more song. This one was written just a year ago, but it sounds like a timeless hymn.

And like many worship songs, the words that are in it are taken from imagery which is found throughout the Bible. I don't know if you know it or not. It's been online. We put it in some of the YouTube stuff as you've been going on.

[36 : 35] But if you want to sing along, you'd be most welcome. But we'll probably stay seated for this because it is quite a mellow one. It's Al Mark singing on it again. But it's a song called By the Grace of God, which seems a nice way to perhaps round off what we've been thinking about today.

If you know it, sing along. If you don't, just let the words sink in. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

I rest my soul on Jesus

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. are strong enough to carry me through it all by the grace of God so high upon his shoulders safely bought this far helper of my helpless soul the king of broken hearts his love is like the mighty ocean his love for me will never stop oh his arms are strong enough to carry me through it all by the grace of God you are the passion of my life Lord Jesus you are the song within my soul my strength my hope my all in all is you thank you

Jesus you thank you Lord thank you Lord when breath grows still and night draws near I will not be afraid I know the plans he has for me don't finish at my grave his love is like the mighty ocean and his love for me will never stop and all his arms are strong enough to carry me through it all by the grace of God through it all by the grace of God by your grace I'll stand and so God thank you very much for being with us tonight as always we ask Lord we ask Lord that something what we've heard or that you've put into our mind tonight would indeed stay with us in the hours and the days to come and was mentioning on the way in that she felt there was something that she was going to get from tonight which is a nice optimistic way to enter church and so we pray Lord for each of us whether we've got something that we know we want to take home from tonight or perhaps we haven't maybe would you bring in mind something that would flash up from tonight that we've been thinking about would you remind us of that in the days to come but we're grateful for your guidance your gentleness with us and as a church Lord as a collective would you guide us forward in these weeks to come to know how to do this gathered communal stuff in a way which brings all of the flock with us under you we pray that we might be united and bound together in our love for one another and ultimately our love for you so bless us that we might be a blessing indeed may the blessing of God Almighty the Father the Son and the Holy Spirit may that blessing be on each of us and all those who God has given us to love and live alongside both now and always

[43 : 27] Amen