

Better Than Life

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[0 : 00] Welcome again to St. John's. If you're new, my name is Aaron, and I'm the minister for this service, and I'd love to meet you afterwards, so come and grab me afterwards.

For those of you who were here last week, I preached on Psalm 34, and I asked my wife after the service, I said, what did you think, how did I go?

And she said, well, it's kind of like you preach three sermons. She goes, but the middle one was pretty good, I guess. So anyway, so just the one sermon tonight, I think, hopefully.

It's a wonderful, it's a beautiful psalm, isn't it? Let me start with a question. How do you, what does it mean to know God? What does experiencing God look like?

And what does it feel like to be a Christian? What does it look like exactly? Well, I think David knows it. It's, in this psalm tonight, it's this awesome, devotional, beautiful, wonderful hymn, poem, and it brings out, I think, four features of an authentic faith.

[1 : 22] And those are, an inward affection for God, two, an outward expression of that, three, an assurance of salvation, and four, persevering faith.

So one, an inward affection for God, two, an outward expression, three, an assurance of salvation, and four, a persevering faith. And I think at the heart of all that, these first words of the psalm, O God, you are my God.

O God, you are my God. It's a startling thing to say, considering David's plight. Most scholars agree that David wrote this in the wilderness, that he was on the run, not from Saul, but from a son, Absalom.

And it all started, I mean, it's David's fault, like it all started back when David had Bathsheba's husband killed so he could shack up with her. And Nathan the prophet, you may remember this Nathan the prophet, came to David and confronted him about what he had done.

And there was repentance, and David was forgiven. But Nathan said this to David, he said, the sword will never depart from your house. What you have sown, David, you know, this jealousy and rage and murder, it's going to come out, you know.

[2 : 49] And it did, and it came out in his own son, Absalom, turning on him, wanting the kingship for himself. We could talk more about this, but sort of the basic gist of the story is that David had a lot of children, and one of them raped his half-sister, and David did nothing about it.

And so Absalom hated David for not doing anything about it, and obviously hated this brother, and so plotted to have the brother killed. And then Absalom thought he could do a much better job than David, and started sewing, sort of, you know, riding around town, sort of going, you know, if I was king, I'd do this, and if I was king, I'd do this.

And he was a big, good-looking guy, had a lot of hair. It says that he cut his hair once a year and had way the amount of hair he had, so he was this big, kind of Fabio-looking guy, if you know who that is. He was on, Fabio was this model who was on the covers of, like, sort of 80s romantic, trashy novels, for all those people who laughed, admitted knowing who Fabio was.

It's this sort of Fabio-looking guy racing around, saying to people, if I was king, I would do this, and there would be, you know, whatever, it would be great. And so he got enough support for a sort of bit of a coup d'etat, and so David had to take off into the wilderness.

So knowing this brutal context, I think, again, it makes the first few words so striking, because David, I mean, this is a result of his actions, ultimately.

[4 : 23] He knows it's his fault. Yet he doesn't begin the psalm going, forgive me, forgive me, forgive me, or protection, protection, protection. He asks just for God, and not any old random God.

He said, it's not like, you know, if there's something up there looking out for me, help me now, forgive me now. No, he knows what he needs.

He needs his God. Oh God, you are my God. My God. I love that. When someone adds my to a name, you know it means something. My daughter Sadie calls her, her grandmother is called, Suzanne, she calls her Susu, but not just Susu, my Susu.

And her sister B, she refers to her as my B. So when, so when you could not even know Sadie, but know when she's saying those words, my Susu and my B, you know that that's, points to a very special kind of relationship, a relationship that she has great confidence in.

Oh God, you are my God. What a wonderful thing for us to be able to say as well. But how would you know if you're in that kind of relationship with God?

[5 : 39] Well I've said, Davis gives us clues, doesn't he, in this passage. And I've already mentioned them, so let me just go to the first one. It's when you have an inward affection for God.

And it sticks out in the passage here. Verse one, my soul thirsts for you, my flesh faints for you.

Verse three, because of your steadfast, because your steadfast love is better than life.

Verse five, my soul will be satisfied as of, as with fat and rich food. Like, knowing you is just like, it's like, my soul just had this really great dinner, this amazing dinner. When these are the words of, when you could use these words, like, if a poet wrote these words to a lover, he'd be like, oh yeah, that's beautiful, that works.

That's so beautiful. And they are the words of a, of a man whose heart has been changed, radically changed. Let me make two comments about these particular verses here.

I've already hinted at the first one. What is it that David wants in the psalm? What does he want?

He's in the midst of a major crisis. What does he want? His son has betrayed him.

[6 : 46] He's on the run. He's in the desert, middle of nowhere. He doesn't seem to ask for an immediate out to his problems. He just wants God.

He just wants God. Jonathan Edwards talks about the marks of an authentic spiritual life. And he says, one of them is when you move from thinking about God as the guy who can solve your problems.

He says, you become satisfied with God for who he is, and not just the benefits he gives you. Think about it like this.

Religious people find God useful, but we find God beautiful. Folks, are you there at that place, do you think?

If you don't know the answer to that question, I'd ask you to think about your prayer life and the things that you pray for. The other thing I'd say about these inner affections is that, do you notice in the psalm that David is not seeking after God and then finds him?

[7 : 51] That's actually not the biblical way, although you sort of think it would be. It's actually the other way around in the Bible. It's you seek God because you have found him. That's the way the Bible says it works.

People, I think, have a general hunger for spiritual things, generally out there. But our hearts, unregenerate, will naturally reject or try to escape the true God.

So God has to change our hearts. And when our hearts have been changed, and we've discovered God, it's then that we develop that hunger for him. You don't actually start seeking out God until you've met him.

Until God has actually grabbed a hold of you. And if you are a Christian, that's what's happened.

God has grabbed a hold of you. It's you can't take credit for that.

We'll come back to that, actually. So if the first mark is sort of this, the first mark of authentic spirituality is this inner affection for God, or like this God is on the palate of your heart, so to speak, you know.

[8 : 59] You might be thinking, well, I don't have that feeling. I don't have that inner desire for God. Well, if that's you, but you desire that desire, then that's good.

The knowledge, the dissatisfaction with that lack on your life, that means God has actually changed your heart. And that kind of feeling will actually come back. We'll talk about it again that soon.

Actually, before I move, I do want to, one more thing. I said only two, but I'll say three things about this. There's one line here that really jumps out. The steadfast love, your steadfast love is better than life.

That's incredible. It's not saying that it's the best thing in your life. It's saying that it's better than your life.

It's better than life itself. And you know that it's, the word life there is plural. It means that any life you could possibly imagine, imagine the greatest life possible, the steadfast love of God is better than that life.

[10:07] That steadfast word is hesed. You say that? Hesed. Now, if you're, if we're saying it properly, it would be, it's really like, hesed.

But it hurts, obviously, so, to say it like that. But it's, it's this, it's this powerful word, and it's, it's hesed is, now, if you've done any kind of study, Bible study, you might go, oh yeah, I know that word.

It's like, it's like loyal love, right? It's like loyal love. That's not, it's not a good enough description. Don't be satisfied with just saying, it's kind of this, it's this kind of strong love.

No, it's so much more than that. It's, it's a, it's, you know Rahab, do you remember Rahab in the Old Testament? So the Israelites were, they're, they're on the, they're on the path to the, to the land, right?

And there, and it's Jericho, and then God is, this is, this is, you gotta, you gotta take over Jericho. And so some spies are sent into Jericho, and, and Rahab, who was a prostitute, finds the spies, protects the spies, and helps them get out of the city, so the Israelites can come in, and take over, right?

[11:13] It says, it says there that, that love that she had for these spies, that was hesed love. So it's, it's shocking love. It's shocking, it's a shocking display of love.

It is exceptional love that meets a critical need. That's steadfast love. That's the kind of love that God has for you.

So, the first mark, that you know God is my God, is his inner desire for him. For him, not just what he can give you. The second mark is an outer expression of faith.

Verse three, my lips will praise you. Verse four, so I will bless you as long as I live. In your name, I will lift up my hands. Verse five, and my mouth will praise you with joyful lips.

Verse six, I remember you on my bed, and meditate on you, and the watches of the night. God, it's this inner stuff coming out of you.

[12:17] It's like this inner thing on display. I remember as a young Christian, wondering why I had to tell God how great he was in songs. You know, we'd sing these worship and praise songs, and I always felt a bit weird about them.

It was like, it made me feel uncomfortable. It was like God is saying, forget about you, you know, what do you think about me? Like, that's what it felt like to me. I didn't understand it. C.S. Lewis says this.

He says, praise is not compliments. And that's what I thought it was. I thought praise was complimenting God. Praise is not compliments. It's joy that overflows.

So when God says praise him, he's saying enjoy him. You know, like if you watch a great movie or show, or eat a great meal, meet this really great person, you want to verbalize that.

You want to tell people about it. That's completely natural. That's praise. That's praising God. It's the, it's, it's the, it's your heart has been changed. And the consummation of that changed heart is an outward expression of praise.

[13:23] Now, I, I'm not going to mandate what that looks like. It could look like raised hands, like David's talking about here. It can look like singing. It can look like joyful words of encouragement.

It can look like meditating, remembering. It can look like study. But meditating one is an interesting one.

We can trip on that one, I think. That's verse six. The word meditate there is, Hagar. And when we think meditate, we probably think Eastern, sort of quiet reflection.

It's not that. The original idea is a very powerful word. It's an onomatopoeic word. It's the, it's the noise of a hungry lion seeking food.

So imagine the lion in your mind, and, and, and you hear his roar as he, he or she is passionately, desperately seeking something to eat. It's like, Hagar. You know, it's this kind of a roar of a lion. So that's not quiet reflection.

[14:24] It's about being hungry for God and washing, wanting to devour his word. Hungering after God, so much so that it's sort of just, you verbalize it.

Now this inner desire, and this out of expression, obviously go together. So the inner desire feeds the outer expression, and actually vice versa.

So if you don't have that inner desire, I mean, it's been there at some point, but if you don't have that, if that feels a bit bankrupt right now, the bridge to that, I think, is the outer expression. Discipline yourself. Practice the outer expressions of it. And that is a bridge to that inner desire. So we've got inner affection. We've got outer desire.

Next, an assurance of salvation and justice. And we see that in verses 9, 10, 11. But those who seek to destroy my life shall go down to the depths of the earth. They shall be given over to the power of the sword.

[15:33] They shall be the portion of the jackals. There's the scavengers. They're the ones that sort of clean up after the big animals have gotten their share. But the king shall rejoice in God. All who swear by him shall exult, for the mouths of liars will be stopped.

Despite everything that's going on, David is confident that God has a situation under control, that he will be saved, and justice will be done. And do you see in verse 11 there, he just moves, strangely, to third person, right?

So he's gone, my, I, me, and then he just goes to the king. In verse 11, the king. He calls himself the king. Why is that? Well, of course, the kingship is under threat in this situation.

So David is reaffirming in a vow that because God has made him king, they cannot fail. That he cannot fail. That God will not fail on his purposes for David.

And it's the kind of assurance that we should have for our salvation, of course. Because God has called us into his family, our salvation cannot fail.

[16:35] Moving on. Real faith, inner affection, outer expression, and assurance of salvation and justice. Lastly, real faith is persevering faith.

First one, I seek you in the dry and weary land where there's no water. First two, I've looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding your glory and your power. So in both circumstances, David praises God.

His affections and his expression of that inner affection were not swayed. What kind of faith is that? It's persevering faith.

Have a look at verse 8. I love verse 8. My soul clings to you. Your right hand upholds me. It's a very vivid picture of persevering faith, what it looks like.

There are two facets of perseverance here. We are clinging to God and he is hanging on to us. It's more like God is hanging on to us and because of that we can cling to him.

[17:40] The cling word is a wonderful word. It's a very interesting one actually. In Genesis 2, it says, Therefore, a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife and they shall become one flesh.

Okay, that hold fast word, there, that's the cling word. It's the same word. It's like I'm holding on no matter what. It's obedience no matter what. I'm sticking with you no matter what.

I'm marrying a number of couples in this congregation over summer. And there's a great line from the BCP.

I have a number of my favorite lines in the BCPs. What God has put together, let no man put asunder. I love that line. But there's the line in the vows where they say to each other, I give thee my troth.

I give thee my troth. And troth is a commitment, it's a pledge of loyalty. In the really old BCP though, it doesn't say I give thee my troth, it says I plight thee my troth.

[18:50] You have to go back sort of to like a pre-1900s one probably to get that. I plight thee my troth. What does the plight mean in this context? It means danger.

If you get poor, I get poor. I get poor, you get poor. I get sick, you're sick. We're in this together. If you get messed up, I'm messed up as well. Like it's, no matter what happens, we're in this together. I pledge myself to you no matter what. It's persevering love. It's the biblical call in marriage and it's the closest thing to what God demands from us in terms of loyalty.

But of course, us clinging to God, that dangerous clinging to God there. We can only do that when we know God is hanging on to us and God is hanging on to you.

And he's hanging on to you tighter and longer than you do. I find it very reassuring.

[20:00] So real faith, experiencing God looks like the following four things, an inner devotion, an inner affection in our heart. It looks like outer expressions of that.

It's an assurance of salvation, the assurance that says no one can take this from me. And it's a persevering faith based on the knowledge that God has a hold of you.

And because God has a hold of you, you can hang on to him. And I want to close up here by just looking at verse three again. Your steadfast love is better than life.

What is the challenge here for us? Well, it challenges us in many ways, but I think this verse is the challenge is acute because it makes me think two things. It makes me think, okay, if God's love is better than life, his hesed love is better than life, his steadfast love is better than life, it means that that love should assault my anxieties, my concerns, my worries.

If God's love is better than life, it means that I should look at my problems differently because if I have God, I have life.

[21 : 27] The other thing it makes me think about is this. Where in my life do I love my life more than I love the steadfast love of God?

Where in my life do I love life more than I love God? God, and for most of us the big ones in the areas of sex and money and power which can grab a hold of us in very tricky and sneaky ways. They are substitutes, very poor substitutes, but substitutes for our adoration and they shift the inner affections of our heart.

And when we try to find ourselves in them, it's kind of like eating cookies before dinner. It ruins your appetite for the thing that is actually going to sustain you.

So think about those things in your life which are ruining your appetite for God and bring them to God for forgiveness and bring your heart to God and ask him to regenerate it.

[22 : 44] How does this psalm help us when we fail, when we fall into this trap, when we don't do these things we've talked about here? As I said last week, we know from our series in Samuel that David's main role in salvation history was to be the, he was like the Old Testament Messiah who points us to Jesus.

So in verse 8, how does God uphold us when we're trying to push him away? How does God hold on to us when we loosen our grip on him?

Well, as you know, there was another king that was driven out to the wilderness, not for his own sins though, like David, but for our sins.

And instead of being saved, he was killed. And he was killed for us. And that's what he said love looks like.

That's what radical love looks like. That's what dangerous love looks like. That's what love looks like when it is meeting an acute, critical need. This is the steadfast love of God that we see in Christ, Christ, and that is our God.

[24 : 01] And that is the God that you can say, you are my God. Amen.