

Faith Is Praising God From The Pit

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[0 : 00] I want just to turn your attention to the third of the three Psalms, which form a little group in themselves, Psalm 26, 27, and 28.

And you can find this either in the Revised Standard Version Bible or in the prayer book this morning on page 361.

And I would like you to find it in one or the other, just so you can follow as closely as possible. I would like to begin by saying what must have occurred to all of you that this is a terrible morning to be going to church.

The sky is far too blue and the air is far too clear and the breakfast coffee deserved lingering appreciation, which it didn't get.

And the gardens are too lovely and our choir is too successful and the debenture issue is succeeding in its own way and the blossoms are too magnificent and the sea and the mountains are too alluring and the prospect of catching a fish in the Fraser River quite overcame one young man I met early this morning.

[1 : 16] And so you might well say, what are you doing in church? But the difficulty, you see, is that people might, on such a morning as this, get the impression that faith is nothing more than a certain sense of well-being, which comes from a fat pocketbook, a full tummy, a new car, and a garden full of plants eagerly trying to reward you for your labors.

Those things, in fact, are not faith, but they are the results of faith and hope and charity. So that if you want to discover what faith is, you must seek out the sick or the prisoner.

You must strip everything down so that in terms of our church, the debenture issue fails, people withdraw their pledge, you can't pay for the oil, the garden runs wild with weeds, the roof starts to leak, the doctor shakes his head and says, I'm sorry, there's nothing we can do.

When you come to that place in your life, then that's the perspective from which you discover what faith really is. And unless you come to such a place, you might be deluded into thinking that faith is just a sense of well-being which comes from such a lovely morning as this.

But there is another dimension to our world which I think we need to be mindful of. And that is that certain writers have said of our time that we are abandoned by God.

[3 : 15] And if you look at the situation in Iran and Ireland and the breakdown of things in our own country and why doesn't God give groceries to the starving people of the world and why is there such an abundance of suffering in our world, even though we may be guarded from it, it keeps penetrating and seeping into our world and spoiling things for us.

And I find a great many people who in the personal circumstances of their life, despite being surrounded by so much for which they acknowledge they need to be thankful, nevertheless, in the personal circumstances of their life, they have a deep sense of having been abandoned.

And that they encounter this in their marriage failure, in business failure, in illness, in the severe encroachments of old age, they cry out, where is the peace that God promised?

Well, those are the kinds of things that I think lots of people are experiencing at a deep and spiritual level in their lives, whether they consider themselves spiritual people or not.

They have a sense of being abandoned by God and that God is not present and that the only arguments they hear from preachers like me and others is that in their sense of abandonment, God is demonstrating his presence by his absence.

[5 : 07] And funnily enough, not many people understand the refinements of that theological argument. But nevertheless, it's real. And it's with this in mind that I want you to turn to Psalm 28 and see how David deals with it.

And I would like to break it up into two or three sections and to show you. The first is what I would call the prayer from the pit.

And the pit, either in its singular or plural form, is a word that we're familiar with. Lots of things are called the pits because of their relationship to what Psalm 28 describes here.

But it refers very much to the pit and praying from the pit. And if you want to picture it, there it is, a deep hole in the ground symbolizing a sense of abandonment and hopelessness and despair.

And at the bottom of it, Psalm 28 starts by saying, Unto thee will I cry, O Lord, my rock. Be not deaf to my prayer, lest if thou makest as though thou hearest not, I become like them that go down into the pit.

[6 : 41] Hear the voice of my humble petition when I cry unto thee, when I hold up my hands towards thy holy temple.

And there he is, his hands held up, facing the holy temple, but very much aware that he is caught in a pit. And that pit, somebody suspects, may be the near approach of death.

It may be some catastrophe which the writer, King David, is caught in. And he has this tremendous sense of being in a pit that he can't climb out of.

Now let me tell you something about this. Because so many people consider Christian faith to be just an excuse to help us face the things we can't face.

It's not death which frightens people. It's not the termination of physical life which frightens people.

[7 : 53] There is a more existential horror that creeps into the human being and consciousness which is far worse than death.

Physical death, so many people tell me, I'm not afraid of that. But there is another dimension. And it's of death dimension that Paul, or that David speaks about when he opens this song.

the sense that he is in the pit and he is crying for health. And God seems to be death.

And he's frightened of the consequences. And he goes on to talk about the consequences. But I think you have to remember that the pit is something more than death.

that there is a spiritual quality to life that all of us are aware of. Whether we consider ourselves religious or not.

[9 : 01] Whether we ever darken a church door or not. Whether we are capable by the endowments of physical health and the capacity to enjoy ourselves to take in all that life affords, there is still that dimension of horror that creeps in.

The possibility that life is without meaning and purpose and people surrounded by so much nevertheless are aware of the reality of which David speaks when he cries to God from the pit. And then he expresses just what this horror is. And he expresses it in the next verses which I would call a cry for judgment.

This is his fear. It begins in verse 3 when he says, Oh, pluck me not away with the ungodly and wicked doers who speak friendly to their neighbors but imagine mischief in their hearts.

Reward them according to their deeds and according to the wickedness of their own inventions recompense them after the work of their hands. Pay them that they have deserved because they regard not in their minds the work of the Lord nor the operation of his hands.

[10 : 31] Therefore, shall he break them down and not build them up. And that's the kind of despair and meaninglessness that David sees in the world that he lives in.

He sees it on every street. He sees it in every community. Did you see that horrible picture on the front of one of the Vancouver papers this week of men lined up against posts and being shot? And that's happening in so many parts of the world. Perhaps in more primitive and crude societies than our own sophisticated societies.

But you see it's the terrible prospect that David has for himself that somehow the judgment of God will fall arbitrarily on him without God recognizing the desire and longing of his heart.

And that he will be plucked up with the ungodly and his life will be wiped out and there will never come to him the consummation of the meaning and purpose of life.

[11 : 46] And that's why he cries out against him. And if you look at that you can see in some detail what it is that he sees around him.

People who speak friendly to their neighbors but imagine mischief in their hearts. The deliberate perpetrator of deception which has become a way of life for us.

What you say to your neighbor and what you believe in your heart. That's part of the illusion and deception which we perpetrate on one another all the time.

It's not an unfamiliar thing at all. Then he says reward them according to their deeds the wickedness of their own invention.

Recompense after the work of their hands pay them that they have deserved. Now look just turn back in your prayer book if you will to the Vanity which tells you the opposite side of that story and we're not singing it this morning but the words will no doubt have a familiar ring for you when you hear from Psalm 95 the Lord is a great God a great king above all God in his hands are all the corners of the earth the strength of the hills is his also the sea is his and he made it and his hands prepared the dry land the hands which create and hold the world together are the hands which guide and feed his people and that's what we're to look to but that's not what these people look to they look to the work of their own hands not the hands of the God who sustains the universe in whose hands is the strength of the hills in whose hands are the lives of people in whose hands are the outcome of history who is by his hand working out his purpose in our world that's not their preoccupation their preoccupation the ungodly is the works of their hands the things that they have done the things that express the evil and mischievousness of their minds and in verse six their condemnation is they regard not in their mind the works of the Lord they're not aware of it and you see that's the danger of a morning like this in Vancouver that you might neglect to praise

[14 : 55] God for the glory of his creation you might be deceived into thinking that the very best place to be is not in church when it is because here you are afforded difficult though you may find it the opportunity to give praise to God it's here for you to all enjoy it and I'm glad you made it the thing about this then it goes on and there is in the story the next chapter which talks about David's deliverance that God has met him in this situation as I trust he will meet each one of us maybe through one another I don't know but that he will meet each one of us and that's what happened to David and in verse 7 he begins praise thee the Lord for he has heard the voice of my humble petitions the Lord is my strength and my shield my heart hath trusted in him and I am helped therefore my heart dances for joy and in my songs will I praise him a deep sense of personal deliverance he still doesn't talk about what the problem was and the problem may have persisted

I think one of the most important lessons in the Old Testament is that Jonah gives thanks from the belly of the whale from right in the middle of his problem you find Jonah giving thanks because he has a sense that what has happened to him is not without meaning and we can endure absolutely anything that can happen to us in terms of our earthly life as long as we know that God meets us in that situation that's our faith that's what it's meant to be our faith in God does not belong to having reached a certain income level a certain level of health a certain degree of prosperity a certain number of years know whatever befalls us we can know the presence of

God and give thanks to him that's the reality of faith that's what I mean when I say supposing all the blossoms fade and supposing it rains and rains and rains and rains and all our hopes and aspirations go nevertheless there is the possibility of faith the kind of faith which came to David when he sensed that God had met him and that from the pit he was now brought to the place where he was standing upon the rock which is how the RSV translates the first line when it says unto thee will I cry O Lord my rock from the pit to the rock is his experience and it doesn't mean that the problem has gone but it means that

God has met it so you see even in the face of all that this world can do to us and all the suffering that we fall heir to in our mortality there is the tremendous reality of verses 7 and 8 praise be the Lord for he has heard the voice of my humble petitions my cry from the pit the Lord is my strength and my shield my heart has trusted in him and I am helped therefore my heart dances for joy in my song will I praise him that's what we're to come to bear with me we haven't far to go one more paragraph and then we're done look what happens then and this is really what makes the church a very exciting place to be and it's this last it's this last chapter because as

David has seen the blessing of God in his life he makes with it the tremendous discovery that the blessing is not God's private purpose in his life alone but that it is God's purpose for every life and so you read the last paragraph which says the Lord is the strength of his people he is the wholesome defense of his anointed oh Lord save thy people and bless thine heritage govern them and lift them up forever these two things about that you will recognize all of you part of the te deum which we sing every Sunday morning did you all see that in the choir don't want to be careful of that that's where it comes from the last verse of Psalm 28 oh Lord save thy people and bless thine heritage govern them and lift them up forever and did you ever wonder what on earth it means and what it means is that the word govern is that the

[21 : 12] Lord will shepherd his people and that he will carry them that he will sustain them and that's what that's what's meant here when it says oh Lord save thy people and bless thine heritage and that's David says because the Lord has saved and blessed him and that's what makes Christians such miserable people I only say that in a funny way because what I mean by it is that having experienced this themselves they go around telling everybody else that they need to experience it too and of course that's not very popular they should keep it to themselves but David couldn't and I hope none of you can either you may have to work on it a little bit but it's got to come that if the experience of verses 7 and 8 are yours then the experience of verses 9 and 10 will inevitably be yours too that God has blessed you and you know in that that it's not because of who you are but that you suddenly discover in that

God's purpose to bless all sorts of people and you go and tell them about it even though they don't especially want to hear they like it in the pit and this is why you have to understand the loveliness of those last two verses is that we are the Lord's heritage that's what the people of God are you know how you spend your life looking forward to receiving your heritage probably doesn't come soon enough but nevertheless sometimes people spend a lot of their lives looking forward to it and our God looks forward to receiving his heritage which is his people that delight in him that is his heritage in history that is his heritage among the sons of me for you see this psalm in some ways is different now that we have celebrating the resurrection of Jesus

Christ the whole thing is turned around because this begins unto thee will I cry O Lord my strength be not deaf to my prayer the problem with our world is not that God is deaf to us but that we are so often deaf to him and to what he has said to us we need to hear will you join me in reading the song this is how I want to do it the first two verses are very individual so and the third and the third to the sixth verses are a commentary on our world then the seventh and eighth are very individual again and then the ninth and tenth are the praise to the God who has met us and the announcement of his purpose so let me read the individual portions and you can respond with the others can you follow that

I'm going to do one and two and you're going to do three to six and I'm going to do seven and eight and then we'll all do nine and ten so let's stand to do it from the pit unto thee will I cry O Lord my strength be not deaf to my prayer lest if thou make as though thou hearest not I become like them that go down into the pit hear the voice of my humble petition when I cry unto thee when I hold up my hands towards thy holy temple who is what who who are dying who are are God co I God can you dieophy I can you very come that going go down e

Praise be the Lord, for he hath heard the voice of my humble petition.

[26 : 23] The Lord is my strength and my shield. My heart hath trusted in him, and I am health. Therefore my heart dances for joy, and in my song will I praise him.

The Lord is the strength of his people, and he is the wholesome defense of his anointing. O Lord, save thy people, and bless thine heritage.

Govern them, and lift them up for us. His mindfulness Mars us for human beings.

In and Thine's mind Lord, fulfill His everything to your full being.