

Singing the Blues

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[0 : 00] So, if you turn back with me if you have a Bible with you or if you have your Bible on the phone, if you can, turn back with me to Psalm 130 from the book of Psalms in the Old Testament.

And I've entitled this sermon, Singing the Blues, which I think is a really good title for this Psalm, and it's a good title for the theme that we're going to look at today.

And it has to be said that on Thursday morning, certainly when Corey got up and he did his lateral flow test and it turned positive, he was singing the blues.

And for sure I joined the chorus when I knew that I would have to be preaching today. So what you're getting today is what we call classically in the profession a reheat. Okay, it's one that I've preached before here because you're getting a new sermon this evening, but I'm too decrepit to do two new ones in that space of time.

So you're getting one that we've actually looked at before, but I'm going to say something about that very briefly, which is it's really valuable to defend myself here.

[1 : 10] It's very valuable to repeat things biblically. And that's because some of us, all of us to one degree at another, but some of us maybe more than others tend to forget.

I was on a call last, a week last Tuesday for ministers in the church. It was a kind of webinar for all ministers and Neil McMillan was speaking a part of it anyway on a healthy church.

Now I'm hoping he'll come and do that here. It was really very inspiring. But at one point he mentioned something that he had remembered in a sermon that I'd preached here when they were here in the congregation and it was about Judas and Jesus, Jesus and Judas.

And I had absolutely no recollection whatsoever of what I said or of preaching that particular sermon. But I'm glad that he remembered.

And then when I was looking for on Thursday, when I was looking for a sermon in the theme of the Psalms, which we're looking at, and particularly the Psalms, the latter Psalms from Book 5, which we're looking at particularly this week and finishing next week with the last Psalm.

[2 : 19] I was looking back and I found, I went back to, because everything's very well structured and organized. And I went back and I found Psalm 130. I thought, that'll be a good Psalm.

That fits in well. And then I looked and the one before it was Psalm 124, which I preached here on the 17th of May, 2018.

And that was the sermon I preached last week. Well, it was the same Psalm that I preached last week. And what was really interesting, this is just a complete aside, I think, but it was very interesting that I'd forgotten I'd preached that sermon.

I'd forgotten I'd preached on Psalm 124. Forgetting my personality story here. But when I looked at it, what I was amazed at was that it was a completely different sermon.

It took a completely different angle. It looked at different truths from that Psalm. And it was very different from the one that I preached last week, which I think is always interesting because it reminds us that when we go to scripture, it's not just a one size fits all and it's not just one message that's complete.

[3 : 30] We find that it's just multifaceted in its teaching. And there's lots and lots we can learn from His living Word, depending on our own circumstances, depending on the time and the stage of life that we're at or that we're listening at.

But one thing was interesting in it, remembering God's purposes and God's plans for us. I finished on in my notes, which are usually not that full, they're kind of no form.

But the last sentence of that sermon was in kind of note form, new phase in congregational life. People are moving on.

The Brocs face new opportunities and challenges as do many. Let us remember who we are and who is our help. And remember and we recognize that God is with us in the different stages we're at.

And we thought we'd got rid of the Brocs and that they'd gone in 2018 and now they're back and God had all that purpose and planned as we prayed for them and as we prayed that God would bless them in their lives and now they're back among us even though Corey is not fit today and has caught COVID.

[4 : 44] But isn't it interesting that we commit things to the Lord, we pray about things, we pray into situations and we recognize that God speaks to us through His Word at different times and in different ways.

And the value of the Psalms among other things is that they are experiential. They deal with our experiences, they deal with what we're like and who we are as people and they legitimize for us many of our struggles and complaints and difficulties and doubts before God, they tell us where we are to take them and they encourage us in our prayer lives to be hugely honest and hugely open before our living God.

We don't need to have pretense with Him, we don't need to pretend we're better than we are, we simply come to Him and the Psalms remind us of that, that we come to Him with all the things we don't know what to do with, with all the impossibilities, with all the fears and the doubts and the lack of faith and the joys and the thanksgivings and everything else that's part of what makes us who we are.

And one of the great things about the Psalms is their ability to put into song our grief and the blues and our grieving and our sadness and even our sins and confession and praise in a church context and praise in a gathered context when we're the people of God, must embrace both our joys and our sorrows because praise should be our heart expression.

It should be us putting into words and into song what is in our hearts and souls as Christians. Now none of us are old, they're going to be thinking and be at the same stage but actually and have the same emotion or the same issues that we're dealing with but nonetheless they teach us, the Psalms teach us to take all these things and sometimes to stand with others who are going through difficult times as we sing.

[6 : 47] And I do think that we're probably not that great expressing our pain and our doubts and our fears in worship. As far as I think, and this is only from my point of view that I feel as soft with myself, that the soul is missing from our songs.

It's such an important genre in popular music and music generally, you know, African American music and gospel music, rhythm and jazz music often express suffering and loss and pain and guilt and failure.

Some of the greatest music creators that we know are those who've created out of poverty or out of hardship. And I think in the popular genre today I mentioned this before, I think Adele is very good at that.

She expresses sorrow and pain relentlessly in her songs. But it's powerful, isn't it? It's powerful to express the blues and it's powerful to express reality in our worship as much as exaltation and praise because we find that in doing so we come round to exaltation and praise and it binds us all together.

I think it is in many... It is a dying tradition communally, people are suffering alone, people are grieving alone, people don't find it easy to sing mournfully.

[8 : 29] As a minister, you do funerals and that's part of our bread and butter in many ways. And increasingly the singing at funerals is utterly woeful because people are not used to singing the blues, they're not used to mourning in song communally in our society.

And that's a shame and I think it's something that we need to be aware of in our own worship that it's good to sing mournfully as well as joyfully. It's good to sing and read and know the Monday morning Psalms that speak into the struggles and difficulties of our days and of our lives and that speak into our spiritual battles.

And Psalm 130 specific is one of what is generally regarded as one of the seven penitential Psalms, ones that are confessional, that speak very much and confess before the living God and rely on Him for His forgiveness and His grace.

They reach the very core of what it is to be, both Christian and what it is to be a human at the very foundations of our faith. And I hope there are Psalms that you can empathize with, that you can

relate to in your Christian life because I don't think, I think if we can't relate to them, there's something very significant missing from our walk with God if we feel that this confessional expression with God is missing.

And this is a great Psalm that helps us to do that. And it's unlike any of the other songs of ascent that we've, well we've only looked at one of them, but the other songs of ascent are all very communal and they're very expressive of praise together as people go up to festival to remember God's work and to remember God's salvation.

[10:30] And there's this just this great sense of, there's a lighter, more praiseworthy sense in these songs of ascent. But this is very different. It's intensely personal, it's individual, not so much communal.

And it's unattributed, we're not told who wrote it. We don't know anything about the historical situation behind the original writing of the Psalm, which makes it great for us because we can immediately recognize it as a general Psalm for all of us to, as it were, be the authors of. And you sense that as this Psalm would have been sung on the way up to Jerusalem to the times of worship and festival, it's as if as they're getting nearer Jerusalem, they seem to remember, or this individual seems to remember the holiness of God and recollects their position before God like there's nobody else in the world but them and God.

As there, you know, there's a lot of crowd behind them, but it's just them and God. And the Psalmist here is bearing his soul before God. And we are privileged to read that because it matters for us. It's like we are given and I'm very grateful and one day hopefully I'll shake the hand of whoever wrote this in heaven and say, thank you for opening up. And thank you for letting us into the holy of holies of your heart and of your life and of your experience.

[11:59] And he's like, it's just like in the midst of this crowd, he sees himself before God. And I wonder on a very rare occasion has it ever been like that for you in church or in a gathered community of people who are worshipping that all of a sudden it's like there's nobody else there.

And it's just you and God. It's a rare experience. It doesn't happen. But I'm sure occasionally you've sensed that. Maybe it's the preaching of the word. Maybe it's a word that's been sung. Maybe it's in a prayer. And it's like just a place empties. And it's just you and God. And it's almost like we've got that here in the Sam and he's desperate that God hears his voice.

Lord, hear my voice. I cry to you. Let your ears be attentive. Please hear me to the voice of my cries. And that is what really is the essence of the Sam is that the Sam is isn't concerned about what anyone else hears because he realizes and he recognizes that in the depths of his spiritual condition where he feels guilty and sinful before God, he longs for God to hear his cry.

And that is the essence of our faith is a one to one eyeball to eyeball as it were relationship with the living God. And you know, the best church experience in the world won't do it for you.

[13:28] The best Christian friendships won't do it for you. The depth of just intellectual knowledge won't do it for you. The spiritual disciplines that is reading the Bible and worship and prayer will certainly prepare you.

But it's this is God's presence that is craved in the Sam and it's a sense of guilt before God that is that the Sam is longing to be dealt with and to receive mercy as a result of that.

And I think that's a very important thing is the Sam is he that's speaking very much about his own spiritual condition, his own iniquities, his own sins before the living God.

He's not talking about anything else but this one to one relationship with God. And I do think we use the word sin less and less.

Maybe I'm guilty of doing that. I know I'm guilty of doing that. And part of the reason is I think people misunderstand what sin or they've got preconceived ideas of sin so they switch off.

[14:36] So quite often I'll use different words to try and provoke within myself and others a recognition of what sin is. It's not something to be made fun of. It's not something that's outdated.

It's not something that is misunderstood. And it's important that we understand what sin or the different biblical words are used to explain what it is to be guilty before the living God.

Because iniquity is very much the whole idea of guilt before the living God. And we fall short of the mark. We fail to love as he commands us to love.

We break his laws of love against him and against one another. And there's lots of different expressions and different explanations behind what sin is.

But I think there is a danger today of recognizing sin in a therapeutic way.

[15 : 39] What you might call therapeutic moralism that basically we see wrongdoing and we explain sin in terms of our own self-healing. We've done something bad.

It's not good for us. We're diseased. We need healed. That's an emphasis that is significant. And I've probably used that particular emphasis a lot. Or maybe we just think if I deal with this, then that will be better for me and better for the people around me.

So there's a kind of therapeutic moralism about it. It's a therapy. We look at it as something that needs to be dealt with. It's something that we can put right in our lives and we feel good about ourselves.

There's a critical element missing and that is God. That is, there are relationships with God that sin more than all the damage it does to ourselves and others.

As sin is a broken relationship we have with God. And it's that Sam 51 that we were singing earlier against you. You only have a sin and done what is evil in your sight.

[16 : 41] And yes, it has huge implications for everything else in life. But the core, the very basis of it is recognizing that it is God who we offend when we sin.

It's God that we are broken relationship with. And it is in Christ alone that that can be healed. So the psalmist is very much recognizing that it's crying out to the Lord, this saving God.

And he's desperate longing for God's attention, for God to hear him. And you can hear almost, can't you, the intonation and the inflection behind the cry.

This is a cry. This is not a polished theological entrance into the presence of the Holy of Holies. This is a desperate person's cry for forgiveness because their life is a mess and they feel distant from their God.

And it's heart-rending, isn't it? Out of the depths, I cry to you. And we know, and if you've been here before, you know that we often talk about what the Old Testament writers and the psalmist particularly think about water and think about the sea.

[17 : 53] It's always that place of danger and separation. There's so many references to the sea and to the depths and to the darkness and to the wildness of the seas. And that was often as it was referenced spiritually for them.

It's a really strong spiritual emblem in the psalms. It was a bad place. They were afraid of the sea. They weren't good sailors. They weren't good swimmers, as it were.

And it spoke of spiritual darkness and foreboding. And that's where the psalmist feels. He feels in the depths. He feels in darkness.

And he's crying out to the living God for forgiveness and for light. It's almost like we're witnessing a confession of cheating between partners, between a husband and a wife, or the confession of the breaking of trust in a really close friendship, which is painful and hurtful.

And there's many experiences in life that can plunge us into the depths and into despair, whether it be illness or poverty or depression.

[19 : 02] But this is, and all of these things can be related, but this is distinctly spiritual. This is about the condition of our heart, our spiritual relationship with God.

And it's broken not so much, and our darkness is not so much our experiences or our circumstances, but it's a relationship. There's this relatable break between ourselves and our God and His cause by our sin.

We've deviated from the right path and we've broken trust with our friends. And faith is like that. Our faith in Jesus Christ is like that. It involves us being in the depths because we recognize His light and the closer we are to Him, the darkness is exposed in us.

And we don't avoid that. We don't avoid that because it's not despairing, but because there's healing and forgiveness there. That's the one and two whose presence we come.

If our response to guilt or to faithlessness from our living God is to smother it or to run away from it, then we're missing the whole point.

[20 : 15] We're missing the whole point of the honest beauty of confessing what we're like inside before the living God and knowing His healing and knowing His love and knowing His acceptance and His closeness.

As we trust in Him as our Lord and Redeemer, as the one who has paid the price for all the darkness that's in us. It's very paradoxical.

I know that. I recognize that. C.S. Lewis makes that clear. He says, when a person, when a man is getting better, he says, he understands more and more clearly the evil that is still in him.

When a man is getting worse, when a person is getting worse, they understand their own badness less and less. So it's a direct relation to the closeness we are to Jesus.

Do we find that there's that confessional reality and that freeing and redeeming forgiveness and strength? Spurgeon, a great preacher from two centuries ago, was quoting James Vaughan, who is a hymn writer, I think, roughly at the same time.

[21 : 20] And he said, deep, deep places beget deep devotion. Man prays, but very few cry.

But of those who do cry to God, the majority would say, I owe it to the debts. I learned it there. I learned it there. And I think that's a very profound statement that even if today you come today to the worship service and you have done something really awful that nobody knows about, and it overwhelms you with guilt and despair, that's where we cry out to the Lord for mercy.

And that's what he asks from us. And the reality is, the more we know him, the more we spend time in his beauty and in his light, the deeper the depths we recognize are being cleansed by him as they're exposed and as we confess them before him.

Here speaks people who get it, and the psalmist gets it, if we're legalistic in our Christian understanding, it's just about ticking the box.

[22 : 48] Or if we're moralists, moralists who just think we will do our best and that will be enough. Then we miss out on this great reality, and you will have a God, if that is what you are, if you are a legalist or a moralist, your God is distant.

He's far away. He is uncaring and he is demanding and harsh. It's only as we fall at the foot of the cross and are touched by his grace that we understand that his commitment and his love and his openness and his generosity will find out no other place.

And that's the paradox of faith and the reality for us. And so what we find is that in the Psalms and in our Christian faith all the time we are, it's the clashing and embracing of two worlds.

First there is unquestionable guilt. That is a reality. We, a holy God is revealed to us who is unlike us.

That's the reality of his own self revelation. He's uncreated. He is completely whole. He is other. He is love. He is purity. He is justice. He is generosity.

[24 : 05] That's who he is. And you know how it is in life sometimes? We have armchair experts about things, maybe especially in the field of television or sports on television.

You've got armchair experts. There are over weight beer guzzling sports fans who always think they can do better and know better than the professionals that are playing on the screen in their ignorance and misplaced pride in their own abilities.

And I think sometimes we can be like that with God. We can be armchair experts about what he should be like and what he should do and how he should treat us as if we know better than him. And that is such a challenge for our misplaced pride and our ignorance that he's come as the living holy God and he has been nailed to a cross and somehow we think he can do better.

And it's as we sometimes realize that the ugliness and darkness of our own motives and our own hearts before him, even for ourselves and maybe sometimes for other, the way we treat other people, is challenging and is exposing.

[25 : 27] And so we look for God to expose our hearts because within that there's healing, isn't there? As our relationship with him grows and as our forgiveness is experienced.

So there's definitely unquestionable guilt in this paradox and this clashing of two worlds, but there's also unimaginable redemption.

Let your ears, verse 2, be attentive to the voice of my pleas for mercy. For if Lord you should mark iniquities who can stand but with you there is forgiveness that you may be feared.

There's just this great unimaginable mercy that is forgiveness. Whenever we go to the living God for healing and for strength, that's the vitality and the centrality of repentance in our lives.

I think often too, it's too little a part of our Christian lives and yet it's so important. It's hard to conceptualize how much we need the living God in our lives and it's hard to understand what hell is like and what Calvary is like together because they are both the same thing in many ways where he takes our forsakenness and our darkness and it is our sins that have put him there.

[26 : 53] And it's entering into that in many ways and seeing ourselves and seeing the cost and yet looking at the tremendous love and mercy and peace of realization.

And I must go back and look at that sermon on Judas. Unimaginable redemption and this great new reality which comes out of this confession where the psalmist says, I wait for the Lord, my soul

waits in His Word.

I hope my soul waits for the Lord more than the watchman. More than the watchman I wait. So there's this great new reality as we confess our need before him and our sin before him. There's this great hope, great hope in his promise and in his truth and in this saving character that all the people are going up to Jerusalem to remember in the three different festivals, festivals salvation and provision by God right through in the Old Testament as we looked at last week. And it's as if as they're walking up, maybe at the early morning they're seeing the watchman that are on the ramparts of the walls of Jerusalem and they're thinking of these watchmen and they're saying, well, I've got to wait on the Lord like that because I know that the morning is coming and I know that that comes from his forgiveness and from his grace and there's that repeated emphasis which so often happens in Scripture.

[28 : 17] Sometimes we feel like these watchmen don't we? You're kind of sleepless. You're restless in your life. You're mine. It seems to have been hard for them that their mind were playing games with the half light of the morning and was there people coming?

What was the enemy doing? And as they got exhausted as their eyes went heavy, as they craved that morning to come, then he sees that and experiences the Christian life like that.

In our Christian lives, there's this constant need to wait on the Lord and recognize that his answers come. His promises are true and we depend on him and seek to know him and love him greater. And the response of that is shared testimony. And with this we finish verses seven and eight, the last two verses. Oh, Israel, hoping the Lord for with him is steadfast love with him, plentiful redemption.

He will redeem Israel from all their iniquities. It's like they're snapped out of that completely individual place where they have been in thinking of their selves with God and they're back on the road with their companions.

[29 : 24] And there's a shared testimony of what God has done. That's one of the reasons we gather together because we share testimony and we are not called to be isolate Christians.

We're not called to walk this road on our own. Yes, there will be an emphasis in times when we feel it's only me and God in the whole universe. The idea is to bring us to that point of confession and forgiveness and assurance of his great love and his great care for us.

And we then share that relief from despair with others in our lives. There's this great hope that we're to have in the Lord. Hebrews speaks of it as that sure and certain hope, not a wispy kind of vague hope.

We've talked about that a lot as we understand what he reveals and what he says for us and what his promises are. It's interesting.

Preacher heal yourself. Last Sunday we mentioned that Psalm 124. And if you remember that Psalm had two great calls.

[30 : 31] One need for help, Lord, help me. And there was also a recognition that the Lord is on my side.

And that was last Sunday morning. On Monday in particular, and I'm not going to anything here, but I felt really anxious on Monday morning for a variety of reasons.

And it's something I very rarely experienced, to be honest. But I had physical symptoms with that as well, with that anxiety. Lots of different things that happen anyway.

So what I thought was, well, listen, preacher, apply the truth that you've heard, that you've preached yesterday about the Lord being on my side, the Lord being my help.

And I cried out and I called out because I recognized that it's far too easy to know these things in our head and not believe them in our hearts and apply them in our lives.

[31 : 31] It's not fable and it's not make-believe and it's not just trying to feel better about ourselves. It's a living relationship with the God who is on our side and who promises to be our help.

Now, that's not an easy fix. That's not to say that the reasons for anxieties go away, but it gives us a different perspective. And the physical symptoms went.

The reasons for the anxiety were still there. I knew that God was on my side and I knew that He was my help to take me through. And here I am a week later because God has been my help and He is that steadfast love for us, that great word there, steadfast love, covenant love for us.

You know, He says, you have my word. You have my word as I trust in you, as you trust in me. His resolute will, it's not a capricious emotional attachment to us.

It's sealed in the blood of His Son that He wants us to cry out to Him for forgiveness and hopes the settled reason of God, the Father, God, the Son, God, the Holy Spirit that we spoke about to the children in the character of who God is.

[32 : 48] And it's a message of forgiveness for with you there is forgiveness and you redeem Israel. Forgiveness, different words. We tap into that deep seated recognition of God's forgiveness.

Now we can ignore or we can reject the whole idea of guilt if you want. That's what many people will tell us to do. But guilt is only bad if it's not real and it's only bad if there's no forgiveness.

But with God there is great forgiveness and we need to share it and live it honestly within the church and testify it to it within the world.

So let's not, as we rise from our time together, be armchair experts about God, judging or thinking that we could do better or no better.

And how dare He say we need to be forgiven and that our hearts are not good. But understand that He is good and He transforms our hearts to become good as we trust and understand in His sacrificial love and salvation for us.

[34 : 05] Amen. Lord God, hear us as we cry. Thank you for this, Sam, for this honesty. Thank you that you don't demand of us to be better than we could ever be.

That you don't ask us to jump through hoops to be in relationship with you. You've seen us. You know us. We're a mess. And yet you've come and you've said, I love you and I am dying in your place and taking the mess that is your life before God and I will take that guilt before God.

The Father is God the Son with the agreement of God the Spirit and I will defeat the reality of the separation that there is between us on the cross.

And in resurrection, which we look at tonight, we pray that we would realize forgiveness and life and relationship unparalleled.

Amen.