

Joy in Dark Places

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- [0 : 0 0] So Sam 30 is a Sam that's close to my own heart for a number of reasons. It's a Sam that's been a great strength to me this summer. And one of the nice things about preaching standalone sermons is you can basically choose whatever you want.
- So I thought we'd look together at Sam 30 this evening. It's a song that David wrote at the dedication to the temple, but more importantly, it's a song where he's looking back over this period of time in his life where he was suffering and how God was at work in his life.
- He writes in verse 5, God's anger is but for a moment his favor is for a lifetime. Weeping may tarry for a night, but joy comes with the morning.
- Over the last couple of weeks, Derek's been looking at the life of Job and Job's response to a period of incredible suffering in his life. And this evening I want to look at Sam 30 and see how it gives us maybe a slightly different perspective on suffering and how really the Sam's more broadly can help us when life is hard.
- I just want to think about four very brief points on the theme of suffering and joy, primarily drawn from Sam 30. But suffering is something that each and every one of us is affected by to one degree or another.
- [1 : 1 5] Even if right now in our lives we're not going through a period of suffering, we can pretty much guarantee there's people around us here tonight who are. And we were thinking over the last few weeks in Job of the importance of ministering to each other, to one another in our times of suffering.
- Now I think the Sam's are really brilliant when it comes to this, because they contain all of this amazing theology, all of this profound truth about God and about ourselves.
- But none of it is abstract. It's theology that is like, it's hammered out in the furnace of human experience, of life and pain and grief and heartache and guilt and shame and all these human emotions.
- A huge number of these Sam's are written in the context of suffering. And as we look at Sam 30 together, as I say, there's four brief points I want us to think about this evening. First of all, I want to see what the Sam's teach us about the reality of suffering.
- Secondly, we're going to see that we're called to be prayerful sufferers. Thirdly, we're called to be patient sufferers. And then finally, very briefly, we'll look at what Sam 30 teaches us about suffering and praise.
- [2 : 2 6] So first of all, the reality of suffering. I think as Christians, we have to remind ourselves that suffering is a reality. It's not just a possibility.
- James chapter one says, consider it pure joy, brothers and sisters, when you experience various trials. You know that James does not say if you experience various trials, he says when you experience trials.
- Likewise, in the passage in John that we read earlier, John chapter 16, Jesus says, in this world, you will have trouble, tribulation. So suffering is something that we are guaranteed to face at some point in our lives.

And we know that more broadly in our experience as human beings. We know that no matter how much we progress as a civilization, we can never get away from the fact that human beings will suffer in a range of different ways.

We have maybe advanced as humanity in so many ways from the time that the Psalms were written in things like technology and medicine and education and various different general living conditions.

[3 : 33] One thing human beings can never seem to evolve from or escape from is suffering. Nowadays, particularly in the US, the prosperity gospel is becoming more and more popular.

And really the key message of the prosperity gospel is that when you believe God enough, when you trust God, God will bless you and he wants you to be happy and prosperous and healthy and wealthy.

You know, hashtag blessed. We're told we want to live our best life now. One preacher of the prosperity gospel said this, when we obey God, we're not really doing it for God. We're doing it for ourselves.

Because God's greatest pleasure is when we are happy. That is what gives God the greatest joy. So the message that God's primary desire for our lives is to be happy and content and wealthy and healthy is a message that's not only wrong but extremely harmful.

How does it fit in with our lived experience as Christians? I wonder how it sounds to people out there who are going through a period of illness or a breakdown in a marriage or experiencing mental health difficulties.

[4 : 47] Even if you stick on the news today, it's dominated by stories of chaos and terror and grief. And it reminds us that our world is absolutely full of brokenness and pain.

All of these things were around in King David's day. They all flow from the same problem, the problem in our hearts that we were thinking about this morning in Mark 7.

Hearts that are full of darkness have consequences in our world. So the message that God wants us to be happy and healthy and wealthy and prosperous doesn't really translate into reality.

But Sam 30 meets us where we're at. Sam 30 is realistic. David, the man who wrote the Psalm, is a man who is no stranger to suffering.

He knew that it's easy maybe to trust God when life is going well, in our times of prosperity, when things are good. It's a whole other thing to trust God when the dark times come.

[5 : 47] When we experience a crisis, how should we react as Christians when we face a diagnosis that we're dreading? How should we react to the breakdown of a relationship or a fracture in our family?

Or when we feel torn apart by guilt or by shame? Or when we experience loss and the pain of bereavement?

I think the Psalms themselves are a prime example. They are full of anguish and pain and grief and raw emotion.

The point is, the first point is that it's not unusual to experience these things. Suffering is a reality of life. It's not a sign that we are getting things wrong as Christians.

God knows there will be times in our lives when we feel the darkness and the pressure and the pain. God knows the Christian faith is not a ticket to an easy life.

[6 : 46] So that's first of all, the first point, the reality of suffering. Now as we get into Sam 30, I want to see just three things very briefly. First of all, we are called to be prayerful sufferers.

Now the actual context to Sam 30 is not hugely clear. It's clearly been something that illness that David has been through, but it's an illness that's almost killed him. Read verse 1 to verse 3. I will extol you, O Lord, for you have drawn me up and not let my foes rejoice over me.

O Lord, my God, I cry to you for help and you healed me. O Lord, you brought my soul up from sheol, from the grave. You restore me to life from among those who go down to the pit.

You see, our culture today has developed a kind of stoic mentality when it comes to suffering. In other words, we kind of just have to deal with it. We have to roll our sleeves up and get on with it.

And I think even as Christians, we can let that attitude kind of influence our own response to suffering. We say we're fine, we have it all together.

[7 : 47] But we see in many of these Psalms, and Sam 30 is just one example, David essentially pours his heart out to God. Somewhere around a third of the Psalms are prayers.

They're a conversation between the Sammest and God. And in each one of them, we see that they are heartfelt, they are raw, they are packed full of emotion.

The language in Psalm 30 contains language of crying to God, pleading with God. And we can see from Psalms like Psalm 30 that this kind of prayer doesn't have to be long, it doesn't have to be eloquent, it doesn't have to be really thought through.

We come to God as broken people. Look how David prayed in verse 10. Hear me, O Lord, be merciful to me, be a helper.

David is effectively just saying, Lord God, I need you. So as we think about being prayerful sufferers, we recognize that we come to a God that we can talk to.

[8 : 50] Psalm 30 we've seen uses the language of crying out. Many of the Psalms use this kind of language. But one of the key points here is that this is language being addressed to God.

This is not abstract. David has not sat down and penned a short triad on suffering. It's not abstract. Look at all the I and the you language in the whole Psalm.

It's like we are listening in on conversation between David and God. I think sometimes we neglect this in our own lives as Christians. Maybe we find it easier to talk about God than we find to talk to God.

Well, we look at the experience of Jesus. Jesus on the cross cries out the words of Psalm 22, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me? As Jesus takes the full weight of human sin and experiences the darkness in the place of his people, his instinctive response is to cry out to his father.

We don't know what illness David is going through, but it's something that led him to cry out to God. So when we find ourselves in a dark place, when we find ourselves going through a period of suffering, we have to be sufferers who are prayerful, who come to our father in our time of need.

[10 : 11] Secondly, we come to a God who knows. Psalm 139, we mentioned it this morning. God is a God who knows. Maybe we don't have the right words sometimes.

But Psalm 139 tells us that God is a God who examines us, who knows us through and through, who knows our sitting from our rising. Before we speak a word, it is well known to him.

So we don't surprise God when we bring to him our burdens, when we come to him with our cries and our pleas. God is never shocked by our brokenness.

Thirdly, as prayerful sufferers, we come to a God who answers. We see this in Psalm 30. Psalm 30 is a Psalm of answered prayer, a God who hears the prayers of his people.

David's experience here clearly experience healing from God, restoration. He says in verse five, God's anger, but for a moment his favourites for a lifetime.

[11 : 08] Weeping may tarry for a night, but joy comes in the morning. You have turned my morning, verse 11, into dancing. You have loosed my sackcloth and clothed me with gladness.

We have a God who listens and answers our prayers. And that's not always in the way that we expect. Sometimes we think we know what God should do. We tell God what he should do.

And we're frustrated. We find it difficult when he answers in a way we don't expect. But God will either directly heal us, transform our situation, or he will give us the grace and the strength we need to walk that road.

So we're called to be prayerful sufferers, but we're also called to be patient sufferers. Sometimes we do still have to walk that road. Sometimes we have to face that dark experience.

Christians are sometimes called to show extreme patience in the face of suffering. You see, sometimes it can feel as if nothing is ever going to get better.

[12 : 12] We can be so weighed down by what we're going through that we struggle to see the bigger picture. I think verse 5 is a wonderful reminder of perspective, the importance of perspective.

His anger is but for a moment. His favour is for a lifetime. Weeping tears may tarry for a night, but joy comes with the morning. You see, the picture of night is a strong image when it comes to suffering.

Things always seem worse at night. A night can drag on. Everything can seem hopeless.

But the thing about night is that it always turns into morning. Dawn always comes. And God's word reminds us that no experience in our life no amount of suffering will ever last.

Romans 8 verse 18 says, I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. In the same way James in chapter 5 and verse 7 tells us to be patient in the face of suffering.

[13 : 18] Be patient, he says, until the Lord's coming. As you know, in the Bible, we count as blessed those who persevere. You have heard of Job's perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about.

The Lord is full of compassion and mercy. But we find it so hard to wait on God. We find it so hard to be patient. We live, I think, in a society and a culture where waiting is hard.

I only realised recently how conditioned I have been by Amazon Prime. Amazon Prime is great. You can order almost anything with one click and within 24 hours it arrives at your door.

I can be looking for a book I need for an essay or something I need for the flat, and I can have it almost instantly. But recently I had to order something from another website and it took about two weeks to come and I was constantly every day clicking on the tracking and seeing where this item was and I was frustrated.

See, the features of modern technology are great, but they can make us incredibly impatient people. We have things like Netflix and on-demand streaming services that mean that we can watch a movie at the click of a button.

[14 : 26] We don't have to go out to a blockbuster and rent a DVD and hope that the DVD is not scratched and we can watch something instantly. And so when it comes to patience in times of trial, so often we expect an instant solution.

We expect God to give us what we want now. I think Sam 30 gives us a really helpful perspective. Weeping may stay for a night, but joy comes in the morning.

Sometimes all we can do is say, how long, oh Lord? We recognize as Christians we might never be able to explain why we go through some of the things we face.

You might remember a show on TV, I think I've used this example here before, but you've probably forgotten as a few years ago now, Art Attack, Neil Buchanan. It's a show where there'd be various art projects and one of them, he would go out into an open area like a field or a car park or something and he would start laying down all of these random objects, these household objects like clothes and bags and all sorts of things.

And while he's doing that, the camera is down at ground level so you can't really make sense of what he's doing. But when he's finished laying all these things out after about five minutes, the camera zooms up to a view from the sky and you're looking down on the whole project and all of a sudden you can actually see that all of these things, all of these apparently useless objects, when they're put together form an incredible piece of art.

[15 : 56] It's impossible to make sense of what he's doing at the time but with the right perspective you can see. And I think as Christians, sometimes we need to remind ourselves the importance of perspective.

I think we need to remind ourselves that while we can maybe never make sense of what God is doing now, he is absolutely at work. There was a man in the Old Testament called Hezekiah.

He went through another life-threatening illness and afterwards he came through it and he said, surely it was for my benefit that I suffered such anguish.

It seems like such a difficult thing to say, to look at our suffering and to see how God could work in it for good. But this is what we see David do in Psalm 30. We see that he's reflecting over this period of suffering and it leads him to praise.

The Psalm is a Psalm that is wrapped in praise. This is the fourth thing. As David looks back over his suffering, he is able to praise God. Verse 1, I will extol you, Lord, for you have drawn me up and the Psalm closes.

[16 : 59] You have turned my mourning into dancing. You have loosed my sackcloth. You have clothed me with gladness. That my glory might sing your praise and not be silent. Oh, Lord, my God, I will give thanks to you forever.

John Calvin, a man we looked at this morning. A man, somebody's portrayed unfairly as being cold and distant and uncaring. I think that's unfair, but what he actually went on to say about suffering was this.

It's certain that all of our senses of our nature are so formed that every trial produces in us grief and sorrow. But this never prevents the children of God to rise by the guidance of the Spirit above our sorrows.

Hence, it is in the midst of trouble we do not cease to rejoice. In other words, if you're a Christian here this evening, your joy ultimately does not depend on your circumstances.

Your ability to praise God does not depend on your circumstances. The hope we have in Jesus Christ gives us that perspective. It tells us ultimately that joy that comes in the morning.

[18 : 08] See, as Christians, we can face suffering with hope because we know that Jesus has already won the victory over death. We know that one day he will return. Revelation 21 tells us that he will right every wrong.

He will wipe away every tear from our eyes. On that day, there will be no more death, no more mourning, no more crying, no more pain. Everything will be made new, and new heavens and a new earth.

So when we are faced with that diagnosis, when we feel broken by grief and pain and sadness, when we feel hopeless, when we feel weighed down by the pressures and burdens of life, we are reminded that we can praise God in our suffering, through our suffering, because of our hope.

You see, lots of people in our world today face suffering with no hope. Suffering is senseless. I think sometimes they see Christian faith as a wishful thinking, a blind optimism.

I was told this summer that my faith is a crutch, and that's a hard thing to hear. But we know in our experience as Christians that it's so much more than that. J.I. Packer said, optimism is something that hopes for the best with no guarantee.

[19 : 28] Often it's no more than whistling in the dark. Christian hope, by contrast, is faith looking ahead to the fulfilment of God's promises. Optimism is a wish without warrant.

Christian hope is a certainty, guaranteed by God himself. Optimism reflects ignorance as to whether good things will ever actually come. Christian hope expresses knowledge that every day of our lives and every moment beyond it, the believer can say with truth on the basis of God's own promises, the best is yet to come.

This is something that Corrie Ten Boom firmly believed in her own experience. She was a Holocaust survivor. She lived through the Auschwitz concentration camp. She lost her sister there. And afterwards she said that no pit is so deep that God is not deeper still.

With Jesus, even in our darkest moments, the best remains and the very best is yet to be. Sam 30, I think, provides us with a wonderful reminder that however long the night might feel, morning will always come.

Weeping might tarry for a time, but joy comes in the morning. We pray that God would enable our hearts to embrace that joy even in the darkest of times.

[20 : 44] Let's pray. Lord God, we come before you this evening and we thank you and we praise you for our Saviour Jesus Christ.

We thank you for the hope that we have in him. We thank you, Lord God, that you have taken on the ultimate darkness on the cross. We thank you that you have secured for us our hope of life everlasting.

We thank you, Lord, too, that you walk with us through our suffering. We thank you, Father, that we can have joy in the midst of the darkest experiences of our lives.

And we pray, Father, that you would help us this evening to be a people who live out that hope wherever you've placed us in our workplaces, in our times of leisure, in our family lives at home.

Father, help us to be Christians who are so brimming with hope that it shines through and that it speaks to those around us. Father, help us to trust in you more and more. Help us to love you more and more.

[21 : 53] And we pray, Father, in all that we have planned for this week, you would enable us to do it to your glory. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.