

Singing the Blues

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- [0 : 0 0] Okay, so we're going to look back just for a few minutes this evening at Sam 130. It's a very well known Sam to many of us here. We've particularly maybe if we've grown up in the free church, it's one that we've sung many times and we know very well.
- So the best title I've had for a sermon for ages called Singing the Blues and it's not mine. Okay, I have to admit I know that they're sacking ministers these days for nicking other people's titles and sermons online so I don't want to get sacked at this point.
- So I'm confessing and I'm acknowledging that it's not my title, it's actually the title of Reverend Derek Thomas who's a minister in America in a place called First Prez in Columbia but who's previously in the church that Corey is now in First Prez in Jackson.
- He's a Welshman who's gone out to America and is a theologian and a preacher out there and he's got a brilliant article sermon, I think it's a sermon that's been put in towards on this Sam and he entitled it's Singing the Blues.
- It's a great title. It's a great title because it absolutely says what this Sam is about. It's about singing the blues. It reminds, it's just, it's a fantastic reminder of the value of the Sam's.
- [1 : 1 6] Sam's are experimental soul songs if we can talk about them in that way. In the Sam's you'll find things that you don't find anywhere else in song really because they legitimize to God the unspoken doubts and fears and failures that we all know in our lives and that we don't know what to do with it.
- It kind of puts them into words and lets us bring them up to God in prayer and in praise. And praise as we have it here, praise must embrace our tears.
- It's very important that our praise embraces tears and is allowed to reflect sadness as well, you know. It's great that we sing hymns and spiritual songs here and it's a great balance to get the New Testament angle and slate on everything.
- And I do think they're changing even. They tended to be very praisey often. But I think that's changing. I think you get more soul experience in the songs that we are able to sing today.
- And it's, but I do think they're slower in expressing pain because it's harder to do, obviously. And sometimes the soul is missing that you can get from a Sam.
- [2 : 3 0] You know, soul is a very popular genre in music. And it's significant. It's really African American music, gospel, fused, I guess, with rhythm and jazz.
- But it often comes from that background of pain and suffering and loss and sometimes guilt and failure. And it expresses very powerfully that.
- And it's important that we express our blues, that we express our pain and our guilt and our sorrow. And it's as much worship, we must remember this, it's as much worship as exaltation and as praise, as in, you know, clear and focused praise on God for all his goodness.

It's something that binds us together. You know, I've said this quite often here before, I think, that you know that a powerful song at a funeral can be the most powerful experience we have as we grieve together in song.

There's a great power and a great oneness as we come together in song like that. And this is one of what I would call, a bit like it's a Monday morning Sam.

[3 : 39] It's a great Sam for a Monday morning because it speaks about suffering and it speaks about our helplessness. This Sam very particularly speaks about our helplessness and guilt and sin.

And the penitential Sam's generally do. It's one of seven really focused, sad, penitential, can't think of a better word than that, for it, but something that reaches the very core.

Now we know not all suffering is related to sin directly at that level. But this Sam is very much related to confession before God, reaches the very core, the very foundation of our faith and our relationship with God.

If you can't empathize with this Sam and its sentiments, then there is something serious along. If I can't sympathize with the sentiments of the Sam, there's something far wrong without understanding of ourselves before God.

So just spend a few minutes looking at it. In many ways it's not like any of the other songs of ascent we've been looking at. There's been quite a familiarity in all of them thus far.

[4 : 51] This one's slightly different. You might have guessed already what makes it different. I don't know. I'm not going to ask you. But it's much more, all of them do have a personal element, but this is much more personal than the other songs of ascent.

It's intensely personal. Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord, hear my voice. And it goes on and on in this extremely personal, intensely personal way.

And I wonder whether, and this is only conjecture, but as they near Jerusalem, as they were climbing up towards Jerusalem and they were going to worship the Holy God that we were singing about, Sam like this was a reminder to them of themselves and of the holiness of their God and would help them maybe to recollect times when they felt guilt and also received forgiveness from the living God.

But it's almost like there's nobody else in the whole world except the Sammet and God here. The Sammet is opening up his soul, bearing his soul.

It's like his whole soul has just been unzipped and opened up for us to see. And we're privileged to read that because it matters. We're given access into an individual's holy of holies, that place that we shouldn't really be, a place that is entirely personal.

[6 : 19] And he's saying, look, Lord, hear my voice. You're here to be attentive to the voice of my pleas for mercy. Hear. He's pleading to God that God, you know, it's God who he wants to hear his pleas.

No one else matters. It's very similar in a sense to Sam 51 where he says it's against you. You only have a sin now. David had sinned against a lot more than just God. He had committed grave sins against many people that brought the response of that Sam.

But at that moment of spiritual intensity, he recognized it's you, Lord God. I'm eyeball to eyeball with you.

And really what we're being reminded of is that the best church in the world won't do it for you. Will not give you this experience. The most moving, powerful spiritual experience of being in a corporate time of worship will not do it for you.

This is somebody who has come eyeball to eyeball with God. And it's what we, I guess we've been talking a little bit recently about the importance of the spiritual disciplines, the reading and the praying and being in the presence.

- [7 : 30] It's God's presence, personal presence that you can't, it's not once removed. You can't just come along to church and click on a God's presence. Say that's, this is my God bit today and I'll get from other people and then I'll go home.
- This is our intense individual relationship with God. And he's saying to God, listen God, hear me, hear the desperation of my cry, my longing for your attention.
- It's interesting he says there. Hear the voice of my plea for mercy. And that's kind of, it's like he's saying, don't just hear what I'm saying, Lord. Hear the voice of it.
- Do you get the difference? It's like, hear the tone, the inflection, the intonation behind the plea. Hear that what I'm, what the voice of I'm saying, not just the words, but the suffering and the reality and the cry behind the cry as it were.
- And that's what we have intense, something intensely personal that would then go on to be sung corporately. And it's, it's heart-rending. It's a heart-rending something begins in a hurry.
- [8 : 40] Out of the depths I cry to you, oh Lord, hear my voice, let your ears be attentive to the voice. If you should mark iniquity, who can stand?
- So this is someone who's calling out to the Lord from the depths. Now you know, you'll have heard it many times here when we speak about the Psalms, the Old Testament in particular, the Jewish people, they hated the depths.
- They hated the, they hated water. They weren't a water-loving people. They weren't islanders. You know, they didn't like water. And the deep for them was connected with chaos and with sin and with darkness and with fear and with insecurity.
- And when someone says he calls from the depths, he's in a bad place. He's in a place of danger and separation, spiritual, foreboding, darkness, badness.
- I wonder if you can associate with that in your own Christian life. It's almost like we're here witnessing this cry.
- [9 : 48] And it's like witnessing, I hope it's a right, let's see, it's like witnessing the breakup of a relationship. It's not actually a breakup.
- Or someone confessing to cheating on their partner. And you're witnessing that. You're hearing that. You almost feel, well, I don't really feel I should be here. It's that kind of sacredness that we're in a place that we shouldn't really be.
- And the Samist here is expressing that he can't stand in the presence of God in that way. And life can plunge the Samist and can plunge us into many different depths, depths of illness or poverty or depression.
- But this, and all of these things may be linked, but this is distinctly spiritual. This is about the Samist recognizing the condition of his heart before God.
- Who can stand if you mark, if you should mark iniquities, if you take note of the things we've done wrong? You know, it's impossible to stand iniquities being a kind of description of deviating from God's path, going away from what is the right path.
- [11 : 02] And he says, if you're to mark that, if you're to take a get, no, none of us can stand. And I can't stand today before the living God, knowing his Holiness.
- We sung that song. You're a holy God. And there's that sense of knowing that that drives us to him, as we shall go on to see for his great forgiveness.
- But the Sam is then saying that it's right and it's good to deal with the depths. Faith, good illustration, here we have faith is dealing with the depths, not avoiding the depths.
- So which isn't often what we do, isn't it? Our response to guilt or faithlessness is to run. Run away from God. Run away, close Him off, just put cotton wool in our ears.

And yet he says, no, the way of faith is not avoiding the depths, but is taking them to him and asking for forgiveness. Because there we know growth and there we know healing and there we know closeness.

[12 : 03] That is the key to a living, ongoing relationship of faith with the living God. C.S. Lewis puts it beautifully, when a man is getting better, he understands more and more clearly the evil that is still in him.

When a man is getting worse, he understands his own badness less and less. You see, the light of the living God exposes the darkness.

And the more we let His light shine in, the darker we appear. And it's a cycle of going back to Him for cleansing. There's another quote that Spurgeon cites from a guy called James Vaughan, who I don't know who he is, but I'm sure he was a great godly man.

If Spurgeon quotes him, he probably is. Deep places beget deep devotion. Everyone prays, but very few cry.

But of those who do cry to God, the majority would say, this is brilliant, this is absolutely brilliant, this is gold. I owe it to the depths. I owe it to the depths.

[13 : 09] I learned it there. And that isn't that, those of us who have been in the depths, isn't that what we can say? We can say, I owe it to the depths.

The depths have been what has brought me closer, has stripped back the pride and the self-sufficiency and the stupidity that's so often in our hearts. And we can say, I owe it, I owe it to the depths when we come out the other side.

Deep places beget deep devotion. And that's a great thing. So even if you have done something awful that overwhelms you with guilt and despair, dismay or spurgencies, cry out to the Lord for mercy.

So we want, we look for cushioned Christianity, we look for everything to be soft and malleable and like marshmallow, but it's in the tough times, it's in the darkness that we've often find that our faith grows and our character and our life in Christ grows.

These are people who get it, who understand grace and forgiveness and their own hearts before a holy God.

[14 : 18] Legalists, moralists, people who, you know, try their best and think they're good in their own strength, they're legalists who try and tick boxes about obeying God and criticise others who don't.

When they fail, they run away. They run away from God, legalists and moralists, because their God is harsh and their God is demanding. They don't understand His grace and they don't understand that His holiness was nailed to a tree.

So it's heart-rending and it's the clashing and embracing of two worlds. That's really what we have here. It's the clashing and embracing of two worlds. So you've got a holy God and you've got a sinful person and someone who recognises their own sin.

There is unquestionable guilt expressed by the psalmist. Oh Lord, should you mark iniquity? Oh Lord, who could stand? Who can stand? There's unquestionable guilt in this psalmist experience in comparison with the God who has come to know.

There's an otherness, a purity, a justice, a generosity, a love and a responsibility that we have to love Him perfectly and love others perfectly that we just can't do.

[15 : 45] And there's a sheer ugliness and darkness in our motives and our hearts before Him. It's horrible and it's ugliness deserving of death.

There's unquestionable guilt. And I think that it is missing in our lives today in as much as our distance from God is gaping.

So the further we are from God, the less likely we are to have any concept of guilt. And it's a very unpopular concept. We don't like to speak about it, we don't like to preach about it, we don't like to talk about it because we are told we live in a world where guilt is a nasty bad thing.

Whereas it's only a nasty and bad thing if it's not genuine. And it's only a nasty and bad thing if we don't deal with it. And that's not the end of the Psalm.

There is unquestionable guilt as these two worlds clash. But there is unimaginable redemption. That is what's absolutely key and significant and important in the Psalm.

[16 : 58] Verse 2, Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my pleas for mercy. And then in verse 4, But with you there is forgiveness that you may be feared.

Very interesting response to the mercy and forgiveness is worship, fear of the Lord. Maybe not what we would expect. There's unimaginable redemption.

It's the vital part of the Psalm that repentance is hugely significant and it's hugely significant in our own experience of the living God and can often be too little apart.

Maybe sometimes we talk about repentance as being at the beginning of our Christian lives and then we move on from it. But it's as crucial as eating corn flakes in the morning as our day-to-day living is that we're constantly recognizing, refreshing and being renewed in His repentance and love.

It's hard for our hearts to conceptualize the awfulness and depths of hell and darkness. And yet this holy God takes what I deserve on the cross, the forsakenness of the cross, its darkness.

[18 : 12] We should say, I put Him there. It was me who put Him there. We entered into that event as if we were standing there and we see the cost.

And yet at the same time we see the look of love and the peace of realization that as far as He's done it, voluntarily, He spoke yesterday at the wedding about love and sacrificial love and that is the key to understanding salvation, that God willingly went to the cross to provide us with the forgiveness and the mercy that this psalmist knows as well as his guilt.

So he knows marvelous forgiveness. We don't know the background to this psalm. But there's unimaginable, unquestionable guilt, but there's also great assurance of the mercy and the forgiveness of the God that he knows as His covenant God is.

His God is Lord. And then he comes then to a new reality in the psalm where he says, I wait for the Lord, my soul waits.

And in His word I hope my soul waits for the Lord more than for watchmen for the morning, more than watchmen for the morning. And this forgiveness leads to a new trust and a new waiting.

[19 : 36] And it's five times the word wait or it's words that are connected with it are used in these couple of verses. And so there's a hope for him and it's a really, really good picture.

It's a hope of being in the darkness but knowing that the morning will come. Now I'm sure you'll have experienced that. Maybe when you're not well, maybe you've got a severe pain, maybe it's seatic pain or something.

It doesn't matter what you do, you can't sleep. And the darkness seems, the night time seems to go on and on and it seems so long and isolated and lonely and your thoughts are all bizarre.

And your thoughts bizarre during the night. Sometimes it's a kind of semi conscious of sleep thoughts that are weird and your perspective is all wrong and you're thinking out of line and you're not, you're not thinking straight and it just seems so difficult to be in the darkness but you know morning comes.

And that is a real, a physical truth that's very, very comforting that even in the length and the darkness of the night for us sometimes morning always comes.

[20 : 53] And spiritually sometimes we can feel a little bit in that place of darkness. Things out of perspective were restless and yet he's asking us to wait in these conditions, wait when we're in that, wait and trust in him, rely on him because the morning will come when we experience and know things differently, when we know a sweetness of his sovereignty at work in our lives.

And this is all about trusting in him. The morning, the tiredness, the weariness, the confusion sometimes of the watchman as he came to the end of his watch, waiting for the morning when things would be different.

So there's renewed hope, unimaginable redemption, unquestionable guilt. And lastly we see that he takes that and makes it a shared testimony.

He doesn't just keep, the Sam isn't just about himself, it's something that he wants. His experiences of being in the dark, of feeling as guilty as it's possible to humanly feel and to be redeemed and renewed and forgiven and trust in his God who never lets him down.

He wants to share that testimony. And so he says, oh Israel, open the Lord for with the Lord there is steadfast love and with him is plentiful redemption. He will redeem Israel from all his iniquities.

[22 : 16] It repeats again and again the redemption, the freedom he wants his friends, he wants his testimony to be known as he knows, well maybe he didn't know but God knew it would be a Sam that would be sung in community as they were walking up towards Jerusalem and it's a community reality that needs to be shared and a testimony that needs to be shared with others.

We are never simply isolate Christians. We glory an individual attention but in such a way that amazes us in order to share it with others.

And so this testimony of the Samist is one of hope that God can be trusted, hope in the Lord, morning always comes for the believer and ultimately there's an ultimate reality there of course for us.

But it's steadfast love that we are sharing with others. That is covenant word, a covenant word and a covenant love. He said, God has said to you and said to me, you have my word.

You have my word. I will, it's the same word that created the universe and He says, I give you my word. I say, I will never leave you or forsake you and we are the focus of His resolute will and it's not a simple capricious emotional attachment.

[23 : 39] This word is sealed in His blood. It's the settled reason of the Trinity. Father, Son and Holy Spirit that says, you are mine and I have a steadfast love focused on you.

And that's a shared testimony that we want to share with others. Also it's about that great forgiveness in verse 4 and verse 8. Redemption, what a message. What a message of redemption we have.

It taps, I think, into the deep seated guilt that drives many people to despair in the world in which we live. The people you know, the people I know who may have absolutely no Christian background, interest, knowledge or anything.

This Sam taps into their experience and we are to share it within the church and outside of the church in our lives. This testimony of the forgiving, gracious love of God.

I wonder what our testimony is. This is a great template, Sam, for our testimony. It's a little bit of a mirror into our souls and it's important that we recognize who we are before this holy God and what He has done for us.

- [24 : 52] I'm going to finish by rightly acknowledging Derek Thomas again because he finished his sermon on this Sam with a quote from a great book by a guy called Jonathan Aitken, who was the former Tory MP, Cabinet Minister who served seven months in prison for perjury.
- He became a Christian when he was in prison and he wrote about the value of this Sam because he wrote a book on the Sam's. It's called Sam's for People Under Pressure.
- He wrote about the value of this Sam in that book and also for, not just for him, but for others. I'm just going to finish with, it's quite a long quote but it's very interesting.
- I'm not going to do the Cockney accent. There's a Cockney accent in the middle of this but I'm not going to do it because I can only do about five words in Cockney and then I can go into Welsh and different things and it will just take away from the whole thing.
- There was an incident right at the end of my prison sentence that served as a good illustration of the universality of the appeal of this Sam. My friends in our prayer group, as it began to be known, asked me to give a validictory talk when Sam 130, two weeks before my release date.
- [26 : 08] The event was advertised on various notice boards and as a result the attendance swelled beyond the usual Christian suspects. Indeed there was a general astonishment that just before I got up to speak we were joined in the prison chapel by no lesser personage than the Big Face.
- Every prison has among its inmates a head honcho called the Big Face. The term originally derived from the time when notorious criminals had their faces plastered on wanted posters.
- Nowadays, it was for the most feared and ferocious prisoner in the jail. Our Big Face was an old style gangland boss coming towards the end of a lifer's tariff for a string of revenge killings, as the old Wild West saying has it, he was not a man to go to the well with.
- As unexpected arrival at our fellowship group made several people distinctly nervous, not least the speaker. I began my address by saying that this Sam had made a great impact on me throughout my prison journey.
- I had come to believe that it might have a great message for anyone suffering in the depths. I mentioned that it was not only my favourite Sam, it also happened to be the favourite Sam of Augustine, Luther and Calvin.
- [27 : 19] The Big Face nodded gravely at this. Towards the end of my exegesis I noticed that the Big Face was visibly moved. Tears were trickling down his cheeks as he listened in deep concentration.
- As I finished with a prayer he joined in with a booming amen. A few moments later he drew me aside. John, he says, I'm not. That Sam there was beautiful, real beautiful, got me in the heart it did.
- And I want to ask you a favour, do you think you could come over to my cell on a wind tomorrow night and say your piece over again? I've got a couple of my best mates that would mean a real lot to you.
- I may have looked a little anxious at the prospect of spending an evening in the company of the Big Face and two of his closest associates. Sensing my hesitation he enlarged his invitation and John, he said, to make you feel comfortable, why don't you bring a couple of your mates along with you?
- I mean, how about bringing those geezers you said like the Sam so much, Augustus and what's his name? If they're friends of yours on the B-wing.
- [28 : 29] Although I was unable to produce Augustine, Calvin and Luther as my companions, Sam 130 went down well second time round in the Big Face's cell.

Although this surprised me at the time, the more I come to know the Sam's, the less they surprise me in their power to speak to a wide variety of people and situations, how I wish I'd discovered their spiritual riches earlier in life.

I hope that's a prayer and a longing that we also have. Amen.