

# From Despair to Where?

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well, like I said, we're going to look tonight at Sam 13. So please have that Sam open. I'm going to read it in a short while. The title for the sermon tonight is From Despair to Wear.

If you have a certain age, you may recognise that. For some reason, two songs came into my mind this week while I was preparing. They're song titles of a particular vintage of probably 1980s, 90s rock bands that specialise in the degree of sadness, singing about sad things.

From Despair to Wear is a song by the Manic Street Preachers and it describes something that I think we often feel, which is a sense of in the middle of our tragedies, the middle of the things that come to us that we don't know how to deal with, that sense of, well, where do I go next?

How do I deal with this situation? Maybe that's something you feel very keenly now. Maybe it's something you felt very recently. It's probably something that you will experience in life before too long, a personal tragedy of some kind, a trauma.

What do I deal with? How do I deal with this situation? When we feel like life kicks us, bad things happen to us. When we feel, there we say it like God isn't listening, or when you feel like the worst person on earth, when you become particularly aware of your own heart before God, you know, and you sense the distance between yourself and God.

[ 1 : 30 ] The questions that we ask then are, well, how do we move forward when we feel like life is kicking us? How on earth do we reconnect to God when we feel like he isn't listening? How do we know salvation when we feel like we're the worst person on earth?

Maybe that struggle, in many ways, is just what daily Christian life is about, isn't it, if we're honest. If we assess honestly the way that we live and the way that we feel, the way we experience life, being on a spiritual journey, which is one way that you could describe the Christian walk, isn't about walking in the clouds.

It isn't just about having fun and veering off on all kinds of different tangents, discovering interesting spiritual truths, it's about walking with God in the face of, sometimes, deep adversity, in the face of feeling bewildered, in the face of knowing your sin.

That's a spiritual journey. It's being Jesus' disciples, his followers, sometimes when life really doesn't make sense.

I read a helpful person. I was reading a guy called Brueggemann on the Psalms, and he has three ways of thinking about the Psalms. He says there are three types of experience, one of which is orientation, if you like a sense of peace.

[ 2 : 50 ] That means really, just to kind of paraphrase the way he explains it, knowing God is good. Now, that's what, if you go back into the Old Testament, the Israelite community were taught that God revealed himself to them and said, I'm your God.

I am good, walk with me, and I will be your God. They would know that at times, and some of the Psalms, some of the writings in the Old Testament reflect that, a sense of joy, a sense of well-being because they know the presence of God.

The second category he mentions, having the first one being orientation, is disorientation. When things go off track, when you think you know the way life is going to go, and it doesn't, when you feel like God has led you down a different path, when you feel like God is no longer your God, for the Israelite people, the experience of being exiled, the experience of recognizing their own sin, the experience of being judged, all of these things at times, as well as just the ordinary, everyday difficulties of life, made them feel totally disorientated, and that's reflected in the Psalms also.

But the third category, and this is really important, we feel a sense of peace sometimes, we feel a sense of disorder sometimes, but the third category is being able to come through that and to see again, despite the difficulties of life, despite our own sin, despite the problems that we face, despite

everything, despite our feelings, despite everything in our beings telling us the contrary, coming again to a sense of reorientation.

In other words, knowing again the peace of God, knowing again the direction of God, knowing again his goodness and his salvation, and seeing again the way that we should go.

[ 4 : 40 ] So that's the kind of big picture way that this guy was describing a lot of the Psalms, and actually, I said that we're looking at a Psalm of lament tonight, that is in miniature, the way that these Psalms often work.

That's to kind of simplify them and reduce them down a little bit. But that movement is very important in these Psalms, moving from complete confusion, disorientation and angst, or rather, a sense of peace and knowing God's presence to a sense of disorientation by coming through that to again knowing the peace of God, and being able to say, I will praise God.

That's the movement that very often we see in these Psalms, and it's the movement that we see.

So when we ask the question, when we maybe feel a sense of despair, well, where do I go next? How do I deal with this? What a Psalm like this one teaches us is that we go back to God, we seek Him again, and we know His grace and His presence and His favour to help us take that next step forward.

Because as I said, that's our daily Christian walk-off, isn't it? This just doesn't just happen once in our life. We don't become Christians and then maybe go through one period of feeling estranged and like things are all difficult, and then we get back on track and things are all easy again.

[ 5 : 56 ] It's maybe a daily occurrence for you. You know, you maybe feel this, you look at the week we've just had and feel like it went up and down and up and down as your feelings changed, as your circumstances changed, and as maybe your perception of who God is and what He's like changed also.

So these Psalms are hugely helpful. Please don't think of them as outdated. Please don't just think of them as miserable. Let's see how they can be useful.

What is the purpose of the Psalms of Levant? I'm going to read now Psalm 13. I want you to see again what I mentioned just when we were reading Psalm 69, that sense of movement of moving from despair to a sense of new perspective.

So let me just read that and then we'll go through the Psalm together. How long will Lord, will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?

How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and every day have sorrow in my heart? How long will my enemy triumph over me? Look on me and answer, O Lord, my God.

[ 7 : 03 ] Give light to my eyes or I will sleep in death. My enemy will say, I've overcome him and my foes will rejoice when I fall.

I trust in your unfailing love. My heart rejoices in your salvation. I will sing to the Lord for he has been good to me.

What's the purpose of the Psalms of Levant? How do they work? Three things to say. The first starting off of the first few verses is that the Psalms of Levant, this Psalm 13, helps us speak about our pain.

It helps us give voice to the way that we feel. Now, there are two ways to traditionally, I think, respond to pain or at least the first way.

Traditionally, you would say an occult ear is stiff up a lip. Don't talk about it. We'll deal with it ourselves. Don't let anybody see that you've been hurt and maybe don't admit that you've got a problem.

[ 8 : 07 ] I think maybe a modern response, if that's a traditional response, a modern response might be just to affirm away any sense that we might have any weaknesses or problems.

Problems? What problems? I'm just going to batter through this situation because the answer lies within. I can deal with this. Now, I don't think they're very helpful always.

There can be a degree of usefulness in not overly complaining and complaining and complaining and just being able to deal with things. That can also be useful to be proactive and to keep going in life.

However, if that's all the response that we have to the deep problems we have in life, then really all we're doing is saying that the solution is found with us and the Sam teaches us otherwise.

It teaches us to be able to take our words of pain to our Heavenly Father, to verbalize something that is almost inexpressible sometimes.

[ 9 : 05 ] See the way that He does it. First thing to notice is that four times He asks God, how long? Verse 1, how long, oh Lord, will you forget me?

Verse, second part of verse 1, how long will you hide your face? Verse 2, how long must I wrestle with my thoughts? How long will my enemy triumph over me?

Repetition is important, particularly in poetry like this. Really important. It makes a point over and over again for a particular reason that this person is going through prolonged pain, prolonged discomfort, a sense of disorientation that doesn't just last a couple of hours.

And it's almost kind of audacious, isn't it? Do you feel that to keep going to God and complaining like that is okay? Well, the Samist does it.

He doesn't just say, oh, I'm going to get home with things. How long, oh Lord? This is somebody who stands in God's presence and opens his feelings before God.

[ 10 : 13 ] And I think that sense of, you know, we feel things, don't we? And sometimes if we admit it, our appreciation of what God is doing in our lives would sometimes lead us down a very different track.

It would cause us to seize up inside and not want to speak to God. To think of him as somebody who doesn't care about us anyway. So why should we talk to him?

But again, the first thing to see here is that taking the words of our pain and submitting them if you like before God is really important.

How long will it last? What's hurting the person? Well, some of the Psalms are quite specific.

Generally, some of the Psalms have a historical note at the front and they'll maybe be easy to see in terms of what's happening.

We'll be able to know what situation the person is in. Some of them, I think quite helpfully, are not specific. And this one's not specific. Now that's helpful because it means we can take the words and we can actually apply them to lots of different situations that we face.

[ 11 : 18 ] The first problem that he seems to say is the absence of God. Feels like God isn't there. Look at verse one. How long, oh Lord? Will you forget me forever? Now is it even possible to say that?

God, do you know I'm here? Have you forgotten about me? And part two of verse one, how long will you hide your face from me?

Have you ever felt that, that you try and speak to God and he isn't listening? Just that sense can feel like the worst thing in the world.

What we need, of course, as people, humans made by God, is to go to him. He's the one who made us. He made us for a relationship. He made us to know him. And so actually what we should do as humans is go towards him and speak to him.

That's what gives us a great sense of fulfillment, isn't it? Being able to speak to God and so speaking to God and sensing that he isn't listening brings a real sense of terror.

[ 12 : 22 ] So he has this awful sense of the absence of God, but also in verse two he says this, how long must I wrestle with my thoughts and every day have sorrow?

How long will my enemy triumph over me? In the second half of verse three he says, give light to my eyes or I will sleep in death. Again I said this is not historically specific.

We're not exactly sure exactly what his problem is. There are really two schools of thought. One is that he's an old man. David is an old man. He's facing death.

So in verse three he says, give light to my eyes or I'll sleep in death because he's afraid and he's frail and he's lonely maybe. And he has a very real sense of human weakness.

But it's also possible he speaks about how long will, at the end of verse two, how long will my enemy triumph over me? David of course faced many situations where he was in huge danger.

[ 13 : 18 ] He had people trying to kill him, he had people going after him and as the king, as the one who was anointed to be the leader of God's people Israel, he would cry out to God, how long will my enemies seek my life and how long will they seek to triumph over me?

God I'm to be your king and yet these people are trying to get rid of me. How terrifying to have somebody seek your life and to try and do away with you because they hate you. So you know whatever situation this man faced.

And remember this is a man's prayer. He wrote this quite a long time ago but he really felt this. He really feared.

He really prayed this. He really needed to pray this. And obviously we may pray similar prayers. This is different, this is set down in Scripture but it's good that it's set down in Scripture because if you like it validates it.

It says yes, take how you feel to God, don't go away from God, go to God and express your fears and bring them before the one who knows you and who wants you to speak to him.

[14:28] We're able, the lament Sam's teach us to speak our pain. And you know this is really important isn't it? It's really important to see that it's not just about us bottling things up and saying all of this is just my character, I just deal with things and get on with them.

Because of course, when you look to the example of Jesus, Jesus spoke about his pain, did he not? You remember when he's on the way to the cross, he has his disciples with him.

He's about to take time out himself to pray. And what does he say? Even in the hearing of his disciples, you know Jesus didn't think oh well I better look all like I know what I'm doing in front of the disciples like I've got no problems.

Jesus said my soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of grief. My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow. Jesus said that as he was on the way to the cross.

And of course that led him on as he went into the garden and he prayed and he poured out his soul and he showed such great human, the reality of the human fear that he faced.

[15:34] My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of grief. So take your pain but submit it before your father.

Second thing, what's the purpose of the Psalms? Well remember that we said at the start that the whole Psalm works as a process, as a movement, moving from a sense of despair, moving forward, being able to deal with this.

Second thing is to move forward and make a request or in other words to make a prayer. So what doesn't happen in a Psalm like this is he doesn't just pour out continual sense of unhappiness.

There are one, two Psalms which seem like they have no hope although yet they are ones that are submitted before God. They're still prayers to God. But oftentimes in the laments, this sense of despair then leads to a request.

So it doesn't just go nowhere, it helps bring a sense of order, it helps bring a sense of composure and a sense of perspective so that the person can say, this is what I need you to do Lord.

[16:39] This is my prayer. Here's a situation I face and this is my prayer. So what's the prayer that he makes? He says in verse 3, look on me and answer, O Lord my God.

We've already read this, give light to my eyes or I'll sleep in death. My enemy will say I've overcome him and my foes will rejoice when I fall. Now there's often that sense in these kind of Psalms of somebody being at the mercy of violence and attack and somebody hating you and saying to God, Lord please help me overcome my enemies and often the language can be quite, we find it, discomfoting.

But he's seeking the help of God in the face of his enemy and we need to be able to take that principle and apply it to whatever situation of fear or doubt or pain or angst.

The relationship difficulties you have, the personality difficulties you have, the problems with sin, as sin wars against you if you like. We need to be able to take that principle and apply it.

So we say Lord here is the thing that I do not know how I can deal with it. I don't know how to deal with this situation and I recognize that if it's just up to me I can't deal with it.

[18:01] Here is my request, Lord here is what I need you to do. Here is what I need help with. It's being able to bring our grief to a point where we can formulate something, say something to the Lord.

It's interesting I think in some ways some of what I'm saying maybe overlaps with this morning, maybe a good thing. But as was mentioned this morning, calling out to God because of grief doesn't, isn't to say that if we don't get our way we can just go to God and say well give me what I want and God should do whatever we feel like.

So in other words this isn't about saying God give me pleasant things to make me happy. So just to make that clear. And to tie that into a couple of other Psalms, I'm going to read a verse from another couple of Psalms just to see the kinds of things that some of these lament Psalms ask for. What are the concerns that the Psalmist has and what are the things that he ends up asking for? Well just to give you an example in Psalm 74. Psalm 74, what's it about?

Well it's if you like a corporate Psalm. It's about a community of God's people who've got this huge sense of disorientation. It's about exile.

[ 19 : 17 ] It's about being separate from the God who said I will be your God and you will be my people. Now that's a huge problem in their corporate life.

And so the Psalmist says why have you rejected us forever, oh God, remember the people you purchased of old. Oh God, we've gone away from you, we've forgotten you, we've played fast and loose.

Please remember us. So you see the way that the prayer there is such a positive one to make, it's such an important one to make. You can make that prayer as an individual crying out to God for his presence in your life.

And you also get Psalms in the Old Testament that are a real community prayer to God that he would remember them as a people and that he would come back to them.

Another Psalm, Psalm 51, we're going to sing a bit from this at the end. If you know Psalm 51, it's a great Psalm of lament for sin. David is acutely aware of his own, the horrors of his own heart before God.

[ 20 : 24 ] And he says this, for I know my transgressions and my sin is ever before me. It's you, you only have I sinned.

But what does he do in that Psalm, but go back to God and say forgive me? Now what's he doing? He's saying, God, you are the one who I've sinned against and you are the one who will forgive me. And in going to God and asking for forgiveness, he's believing that God is the one who's merciful who will bring forgiveness. See again, he doesn't go away from God. He doesn't realizing the depths of his own depravity, just walk away and say, oh, well, I've done it now.

There's no going back. And he doesn't say, oh, God, I'll never listen to me now. He's in deep despair at a state of his own heart, but he takes that before God.

So moving forward, being able in the middle of the trouble that we face to take our pain before our Lord and to make our request and to seek his face again.

[ 21 : 32 ] Jesus did this as Jesus in the garden prayed before God. What does he say? He said already my soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of grief.

He's filled with horror. What's about to come before him as he recognizes the challenge, the barrier, the affront of the cross.

Well, we're also told in the Gospels that he goes with because of the joy that's set before him. He goes because of the joy that is set before him. And yet he says he makes this request as he goes. He says, if it's possible, let this cup pass. If it's possible, let this cup pass. He submits his request before God.

So the second thing that the Psalms help us to do is to formulate our prayers. When we feel chaotic, when we feel like things are all over the place.

[ 22 : 28 ] Third thing, the third thing comes quite abruptly. You notice the division maybe between verses four and five. All of a sudden things seem to change.

What happens there? He said at the end of verse four, how long will my enemy triumph over me? Sorry, that's the end of verse two. The end of verse four, my enemy will say I will overcome him and my foes will rejoice when I fall.

And then it says, but I trust in your unfailing love. Now what happens there? Because he goes from despair to a plea that still sounds full of worry and concern and fear to saying Lord, I trust in you and I will praise you and I will go on praising you.

And then he goes on to say, I will sing to the Lord. How is he able to do that? Well, the third thing is that the Psalms of the Lord men help us to say thank you as well as please.

See, we're to go to him with our sense of fear. We're also to go and make our pleas, but we're also to give thanks. And so you see that the full circle, if you like, of the movement that this Psalm takes us through from despair to a sense of reorientation, of knowing again the person of God, of knowing again the goodness of God, of knowing again the purpose and the direction that he gives us even in the middle of our storms.

[ 23 : 56 ] Verse five, he says that he will trust in your unfailing love. And that's a really important concept.

Unfailing love. In other words, God's commitment to this person, God's commitment to his people is one that isn't fluctuating in God's feelings.

It's not something that changes by the day. It's something that the psalmist can have complete confidence in. And you see the process of coming back to seeing that unfailing love is what's important.

It's been able to come through all the mess and all the fear and have again that vision of the unfailing love of God so that the sense of peace that is rediscovered is based on the person and the love of God.

He doesn't find the answer within. He finds the answer by going back to the Lord. Trust in God's salvation. And of course, then we get this wonderful sense of verse six of the praise that he wants to offer.

[ 25 : 06 ] I will sing to the Lord for he has been good to me. Now he has been good to me. It may be again, it's not always clear from the Psalms and maybe that he's experienced the deliverance of God, but it may be as well that he's still in the middle of his sense of uncertainty and he's saying I will sing to the Lord for he has been good to me.

You see, we get that sense in different Psalms as well sometimes because of the way that the Lord has been good to me because of what I know about the Lord. I know that he will be faithful again.

So I will put my trust in him and I will move forward. That is how I will deal with this situation. That is how I'll move forward. A few things to know just about this last point.

What we're seeing here is that sense of reorientation because of the character of God being able to say thanks sometimes in anticipation.

So what does that mean for a Christian? Well, it means sometimes again, this was touched on in the morning, sometimes taking us through difficult things is God's way of preparing us, of moving us on in our Christian lives.

[ 26 : 19 ] And so we get that amazing sense that that passage in the New Testament speaks about being able to give thanks in all kinds of trials because we know that God's at work in us, because we know that he's moving us on in our faith.

We give and we say thanks in anticipation of future security. Now the Christian is able to say thanks because he and she knows the salvation that will one day finally come when God returns and his kingdom is brought in because of what Christ has already done.

Because Christ has, if you like, won the victory, we are able even now, even in the middle of all our difficulties, to give thanks. And again, waiting on the Lord, I think is something that we have to practice.

I was saying what happens here between verses 4 and then 5 and 6? It doesn't explain it. It doesn't sort of talk about the thing that suddenly changes in his life, but there's a sense in which he's spent time before the Lord and he's known again the Lord's character and he's had to do that over time.

It doesn't just come in the blink of an eye sometimes. Waiting on the Lord, spending time in the presence of the Lord is something that you need to do in order to know again this perspective.

[ 27 : 37 ] I'm going to read, I'm just going to take time to read one Psalm. Now this is a Psalm that we studied in our home group in Dalkeith recently, Psalm 130.

Let me just read it and I want this is just to reaffirm the way that this works, okay? It's a short Psalm. And this emphasizes the whole sense of movement and the sense of moving from despair to a renewed sense of joy.

But it talks about that concept of waiting. It's also very beautiful. Psalm 130. Out of the depths, I cry to you, Lord, oh Lord, hear my voice.

Let your ears be attentive to my cry for mercy. If you, Lord, kept a record of sins, Lord, who could stand but with you there is forgiveness, therefore you are feared.

I wait for the Lord. My soul waits and in his word I put my hope. My soul waits for the Lord. More than watchmen wait for the morning.

[ 28 : 35 ] More than watchmen wait. Wait for the morning. Oh, Israel, put your hope in the Lord for with the Lord is unfailing love and with him is full redemption.

He himself will redeem Israel from all their sins. Being prepared to be those who wait on the Lord and to submit ourselves before him and to cry out for his person, he's the one that we need in our troubles.

Not just a change of circumstances is what these Psalms teach us. Just to finish off them. I said at the start, I mentioned the song title from despair to where.

How do we deal with things when we feel all over the place? Another song title that just came to me just this very afternoon. A band called The Smiths wrote a song called Oscillate Wildly.

Now, I often think that that's what we do when we face bad things. We go up and down and all over the place.

[ 29 : 39 ] Our feelings are shot to bits and we don't know how to deal with things. Spiritually in terms of our prayer life, it can go to pieces. Then maybe we can spend a week in deep prayer and it goes to pieces again.

And it feels like there's no control. And I think what this Psalm helps us to do as we recognize the lessons that it brings to us is speak clearly and truthfully in times of chaos.

It helps us bring our voice to God when we feel like we can't even get our thoughts in order. It helps us go towards God when he feels like he's miles away.

So you know disorientation, that sense of disorientation that we sometimes face, it makes us feel all at sea spiritually as well as our experience. But knowing these Psalms, knowing a Psalm like this and seeing the truth that it points us back to, that we base our hope not on what we can do for ourselves, not on our character or our strength of will to get ourselves out of the rut we're in, but on the character of God and on the finished work of Jesus and on the hope that we have for the future. And on the way that he's working in us now to make us more like Jesus is what our soul needs in times of great trouble. So in seeking the grace of God, in seeking his personal and the grace of God during the storms, we do as Jesus did as well.

[ 31 : 13 ] We do as Jesus did. And looking at his finished work, we put our trust in him. And we know the refining work of God in our lives.

Let's pray. Father, we just pray that you would help us to learn from your word. Thank you so much for these ancient songs that we can learn so much from.

And I pray that you would help us if things feel very private to us. There are things that we don't feel like we can talk to anybody about. Or when that happens to us. Help us to bring it to you.

Help us to know that you're the God who listens. Help us to know that you're the God who's heard many, many voices over all the years of all the ages. And of all those voices that you've heard, of all those people that have called out to you, of all those people who've known that the only place that they can go is to their God, you've always heard them.

You've always answered them. To those who cry out for your help, your salvation, you've always given it. We help us to know that you don't always give us the circumstances that we want, but you're the one who hears and you're the one who answers.

[ 32 : 23 ] Help us to be able to have perspective. Help us to have patience when we feel our temptation is to have a sense of an immediate demand for a change of things in our lives.

Help us to wait on you. As we do that, help us to know your character more deeply. And so we pray that you draw us into a sense of your love as we know the way that you work in our lives.

But we also pray, Lord, that we'd recognize each other as real people with sometimes difficult lives and needs and concerns. Help us not to just get too awkward to talk to each other and help each other.

Help us to be practical family members, loving each other and ministering to each other. We pray that you would teach us then and help us in Jesus' name. Thank you.