

When Our Hearts Are Faint

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Preacher: Lewis MacDonald

[0 : 00] Well, we're reading Old Testament reading is from Psalm 61 this evening, and this will be the passage that Lewis will be preaching from.

I will read you when my heart is faint. Lead me to the rock that is higher than I, for you have been my refuge, a strong tower against the enemy.

Let me dwell in your tent forever. Let me take refuge under the shelter of your wings.

For you, O God, have heard my vows. You have given me the heritage of those who fear your name. Prolong the life of the King. May his years endure to all generations.

May he be enthroned forever before God. Appoint steadfast love and faithfulness to watch over him. So will I ever sing praises to your name as I perform my vows day after day.

[1 : 28] This is the word of God. Amen. We're continuing our series on summer psalms tonight, looking at Psalm 91.

In the mid-18th century, John Newton, the slave trader who went on to write Amazing Grace, he kept a private journal not long after he converted to Christianity in the early years of his faith.

And no one's really sure about the context for this, but in his journal, he references Psalm 61. And he says, About this time, I began to know that there is a God who hears and answers prayer.

A very simple thing to say. But whatever is troubling or distressing him in the early days of his faith, John Newton reads the psalm and he is pushed from theory and from understanding God's word into experiencing God's word.

All of a sudden, it's not just reading that there is a God who hears and answers prayer, but experiencing and knowing for himself that there is a God who listens. And really, that is all Psalm 61 is about.

[2 : 42] This is written by King David, some speculation over when exactly he wrote this. It's most likely that he wrote this psalm at a later stage in his life when he's already king, and his son Absalom is out to get him.

He's talking about kingship in the last couple of verses, if you're looking at the psalm. And he talks about probably physically being at the end of the earth, he says, far from home.

We could say. It's also just this emotional aspect of how he is speaking. His family life, you know, David's family life is devastating. He has seen and he has caused so much pain within his immediate family.

And now he is forced to leave home because his own son wants him dead and is out to get him.

And out there at the end of the earth is where David cries out to God.

Now, when we read that David cries out and he pleads with God to hear him from the end of the earth, I think we see that this simply is a prayer for the faint-hearted.

[3 : 55] Where does David want to be? Verse 4, it says he wants to be in the tabernacle. He wants to be with God's people. He wants to be where he feels most fulfilled in himself and in his identity.

He is far from there. And yet, that's exactly where he cries out from, from a faint heart. Is your heart tonight maybe faint?

Could you say that you are spiritually or emotionally flat tonight? This psalm is all about being completely ungrounded spiritually and emotionally spent and speaking to God from that place.

It's about experiencing just what John Newton experienced, that God hears and answers prayer.

So, three things from this passage tonight. The prayer of a faint heart.

What does David ask for? He asks for stability, for safety, and then lastly, he asks for a king. So firstly, the prayer of a faint heart.

[5 : 03] He asks for stability. In verse 2, David says, Lead me to the rock that is higher than I. We said at the start that this is David probably later in his life when he is fleeing from his son Absalom.

It's very likely that David here is thinking about a period earlier in his life when he was also on the run and also fleeing. And in 1 Samuel, we follow David for around 5 to 10 years maybe as he is a young man.

And King Saul is worried sick that this young man David is out for the throne. And he thinks he's going to make an attempt for it. So over a few years, we have these records of Saul and his men traveling around the nation looking for David, wanting to get hold of him, wanting to kill him. Consistently in that time, if you read 1 Samuel, there are these references to rocks and caves and strongholds and shelter. So in 1 Samuel 23, he hides by this rock.

Saul gets very close but doesn't see him and he leaves. The next chapter, he's in a cave. Saul comes into the cave and doesn't see David and David lets him go.

[6 : 15] For nearly a decade, for David, rocks are this place of stability and distressing times. So now, years later, and again on the run, emotionally and spiritually exhausted, he cries out and he says, Lead me to the rock that is higher than I am.

Take me to the place where no matter what is happening within me and around me, take me to the place where I know I am stable. Okay, we can go a bit further with that.

What is the stability that David asks for? David asks really precisely here for God himself and not for answers.

And I think that in some way probably flies in our faces a wee bit. When we're exhausted and faint and troubled, you know, we want answers. We want solutions.

And we look at David and all he is asking for is God himself. What are you doing, David? When your heart is faint and you look at life and you say, It should not be like this.

[7 : 31] My life should not look like this. And I don't know why it does look like this. David is saying it's not firstly answers you need. And he's saying that having a relationship with God is far more important right now than having the answers that you hope for.

This morning, Ryan made the point that he was preaching about prayer. And we've looked at prayer for weeks in St. Columbus in the Lord's Prayer. And he quoted Paul Miller on A Praying Life.

We're looking at prayer tonight. I've got a quote from Paul Miller. So he must be the man. He talks about praying to God our Father. And he says, you know, we can look at trouble. We can look at faintness and exhaustion in our lives.

He compares that trouble and that exhaustion to the valley in Psalm 23. And he says that God brings every single one of his children through some sort of valley for us to learn that all we have is our Father.

Father, when your heart is faint and you long for this desperate time to pass, can you say, I know all I have is my Father.

[8 : 44] All I have is my Father. This is partly, I think, what upsets us maybe as modern people. He calls this rock a rock higher than him.

And then in verse 3, he calls God a refuge and a strong tower. He's just using different pictures to make the same point in these two verses. Your hope for this week, your hope in the middle of work and the thought of a new year, of uni and school and whatever else, when you feel emotionally or spiritually exhausted, your hope and your stability of having any sort of peace this week does not come from within you.

It comes ultimately from outside of you, from your Father. You're a rock who is higher than you. Knowing that God is for his people moves us away from self-reliance and towards resting in the one who knows what he is doing all of the time without fail.

Quick side point and we'll move on. This is definitely not to say that we never pray for change and we never pray for wisdom.

We're told to pray for wisdom and for our circumstances to change. You see that all the way through the Bible. Hannah and 1 Samuel prays for a child. Elijah, 1 Kings, prays for rain.

[10 : 14] Hezekiah, prays for health. The church prays up here. It will be released from prison and acts. James says very plainly, pray for wisdom.

Prayers for health, for the world, for safety, to know what to do. The Bible is very clear that we're supposed to pray for these things. But prayer is not just about receiving answers and seeing things change.

Prayer is about wanting God first and knowing him and trusting that he will do what is right. David gives us the clearest example of that.

It's about having a rock higher than you, a refuge, a strong tower that transforms you. It's knowing that the most peace you will ever have is in him and not in your circumstances changing.

Jesus, he looks out at the crowds and he says, I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me shall not hunger. And whoever believes in me shall never thirst.

[11:19] Will you pray this week? Perhaps with a faint heart, will you pray? Lead me to the rock that is higher than I. Next then, he asks for safety.

In verse 4, he says, Let me dwell in your tent forever. Let me take refuge under the shelter of your wings. David is talking here about being in the tabernacle, the tent where the Ark of the Covenant sits.

We've said he is far from that place. He is at the end of the earth. He is not where he wants to be. And he's not just feeling that physically, but he's feeling that emotionally and spiritually as well. And he wants to be back in the tabernacle, worshiping God.

Just one point from this. And we can say so much, but one point, it's being in the place that God promises to meet his people that uplifts David's heart.

Corporate worship is so high on David's agenda. He says it's like finding shelter underneath God's wings. In the mid to late 19th century, the missionary, John Payton, he left Scotland with his wife.

[12:37] And he sailed to the New Hebrides, just a group of islands just beyond New Zealand, to join this missionary team. And he was so sure of his calling to go out there and be a missionary to these cannibals.

Even though his people at home persuaded him not to go. Within months, his wife and his newborn baby die to disease.

Much of his missionary team are either killed or are forced to flee. And eventually, he's forced to flee as well. He was so sure that he was meant to be in the New Hebrides that eventually he went back.

And over the course of a few years, he saw mass conversions. He saw right across the islands, these natives who wanted to kill him finally coming to faith.

And after all those years of experiencing such loss and such darkness, he holds his first communion service. And he puts the bread and the wine in the hands of these islanders.

[13:43] And this is what he says, At the moment when I put the bread and wine into those hands, now stretched out to Jesus, I had a foretaste of the joy of heaven that almost burst my heart in pieces.

Why is David so desperate to get back to the tent again? Why is it so much for Peyton to be a part of corporate worship with new believers that the joy almost bursts his heart, he says?

Throughout the Bible, God promises that his people will know his presence in a unique way and know him speaking to them when they come together for worship.

And David says being in that place is a shelter for the faint heart. Now really, really specifically, we can ask a question that we're probably, we don't often answer yes to, but we can ask the question, do we get excited in the middle of the week about going to church?

Do we say with David, with a faint heart, that is where I need to be? We could go in every direction with this. Christians for the past 2,000 years have gone in every direction with this.

[15:02] And one thing that has been said and asked in one way or another is, why such a focus on the worship service? Can I not meet with God in the morning on my own when I read my Bible, when I pray to him?

When my heart is faint and I pray, does he not hear me there and then? Absolutely, he does. Definitely. But what do you see all across the Bible?

When the people are gathered, it is a real place of safety because it is the place where God renews his relationship with them.

It is the place where God tells them, I am still your God. And we see that again in the New Testament. What does Paul say in his letters as he sends them out to the early church?

In 1 Corinthians 3, he says, do you not know that you, you plural, are God's temple and that God's spirit dwells in you? And in Ephesians 4, Corey looked at this a few weeks ago.

[16:23] This temple, this gathering of people for worship is where we are made mature. It is where we grow from babies into mature people. You can absolutely be strengthened by God.

He will absolutely speak to you through his word in the middle of the week. Even if you pray from the end of the earth like David, he will hear you. But the writer to the Hebrews commands us to

meet together.

Why? Because David knew that in the tabernacle, in the place where God promised to meet him with God's people, he would find real safety under God's wings.

David Clarkson, he was an old English minister, he says, he says, public worship is the nearest resemblance to heaven.

Do we get excited about going to church on a Sunday? Can we pray with David that with our faint hearts that we would really find shelter and that we would again hear God say, I am your God?

[17:31] Okay, lastly, he prays for a king. Verses 6 to 7. A lot of commentators look at this and wonder why this is a part of the psalm. It seems very separate.

It seems very disjointed from what we've just been saying. His heart is faint. So he prays that he would have stability and just resting in God. He prays that he would experience safety in meeting with God's people.

What's this about prolonging the life of the king? In 2 Samuel chapter 7, Nathan prophesies that young David is going to become the king of Israel and that his throne will be established forever. If David did write this whole psalm, which he probably did, he must have had this prophecy in mind when he reaches verse 7 and he says, May he be enthroned forever before God.

Is David talking about himself? Is he talking about a future king? Whatever the answer is, one writer says this, and I find it helpful, and I think it makes sense of this a wee bit.

[18:37] This is the fundamental request that people prayed for the king. David knows that the stability of the nation rests on him, and it will always rest on the king.

And so he prays, will this throne be established forever? In other words, will his people experience peace, stability forevermore through the life of the king?

Your stability, your peace tonight only exists because your life is in the hands of the king. You are able to say, I know life is not what it's supposed to be.

I know I feel so faint, but I know I have lasting peace from someone outside of me. And I know I can go somewhere every week where he promises to minister to me and build me up.

The promise of stability and safety, like the psalmist asked for his years, because the king has bought it for you. We read from Luke 1 earlier, and we see that this child, Jesus, was going to be given the throne of David, and he would reign forever.

[19:59] The angel comes to Mary and says that the prophecy made in David's day is at last going to be fulfilled. And 30 years later, where is Jesus?

He's at the end of the earth, rejected by his closest friends, hours before dying, a criminal released in his place. He is tortured and mocked in his humanity.

He feels the wrath of his father as he hangs on the cross. Where we have said in our lives, I will work this out. I will do as I please.

I will make life what it is meant to be. Christ came after us to the end of the earth, and it completely broke him. But in dying and rising again, he takes his people by the hand and leads them home.

We wandered to the end of the earth in our rejection of God. And yet his son came after us, and now because he rules as king, we have stability when our hearts are faint, and safety, a place to run to where God promises to meet and care for us.

[21:17] David prays for the king's years to endure to all generations. Because Christ rules, your life will rest in his hands forevermore.

Can you look at your life and say, when life is so upsetting, and I am so confused, and my heart is faint, I know I am not self-sufficient.

And even if I try to fill my life with meaning, it never lasts, but there is one who has grabbed my hand and has saved me, and he promises rest, and he promises safety that I can never find on my own.

He promises that, if you're a believer, he promises that your life is hidden with him. our life, our lives rest in the hands of the king who went to the ends of the earth.

Have you trusted the king for that? David mentions a couple of times in the psalm, just to close, he mentions that he has made vows to God, and in verse 8, he talks about singing praise.

[22:31] In Hebrews 13, the writer speaks about something similar, and he says, the right response from us in light of what Jesus has done is to offer sacrifices of praise continually.

And that word continually, it just means persistently. Whether life is beautiful or it's not, and we are faint, praise ought to daily be our response to God.

And so, praise, like David is speaking about, it cannot be based on how you're feeling right now or this week.

No, it's persistent. It's in the face of trouble. What is praise based on? It's based on the fact that Christ went to the end of the earth for you and died.

And yet, in rising again, he gives you everything you need, rest and stability, when you have no answers to your questions, and safety and strength in the place that God promises to meet his people.

[23 : 36] Will you, will you this week pray that God would give you rest when frustration and upset takes over? Will you pray, lead me to the rock that is higher than I?

Will you, maybe in the middle of this week, think about the fact that every week of your life, God calls his people to gather so that he can put his hand on them and minister to them.

Will you persistently, continually praise him, not, not because of how things are, but because, because the king is alive. Will you praise him because the king is alive and because he takes you by the hand and he gives you true and beautiful life.

Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for this psalm. We thank you for David's cries, the cries of a faint heart and we pray this week as we look at our lives we would come to you for stability.

We would run to the rock that is higher than us. We pray that we would have a heart for worshiping with your people more and more every week and that it would be a reason for us to be excited.

[24 : 52] And Lord, help us, no matter what our life looks like, to praise you like we ought, to thank you and to love the king who came and took us to himself.

So help us with these things we ask for Jesus' sake. Amen.