

Down in the Dumps?

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Preacher: Derek Lamont

[0 : 00] We were singing and quite singing as much of it as we were going to. Oh, we did eventually. But we've also read that passage in the Old Testament, Psalm 30.

And I would like this evening to look at this Psalm and recognise that the experience of David are fairly unique in many ways as a representative of God's, the King.

And as an Old Testament believer, but there are principles I hope that we can take to one degree and another in our own lives. And this Psalm is entitled for the dedication of the temple, a Sam of David.

And it seems fairly clear as the historical background to this Psalm which is given to us in 1 Chronicles chapter 21 or in 2 Samuel chapter 24.

The same story is recounted twice in these different passages. I'm going to read one of them in a little while. But the reality for David was that his experience, that he is recalling in this Psalm is a fairly bleak experience for him spiritually.

[1 : 16] And it seemed that he was ill and depressed. You lifted me, he says, out of the depths.

You brought me from the grave. Oh Lord, I call to you and you healed me. You spared me from going down into the pit. It may be a slightly pictorial language.

It may not have been a physical illness that he was engaging. It may not have been that he was physically at death's door when he talks about being lifted from a shield or the grave or the pit. But nonetheless, his experience was so bleak for him. And it may well have been a physical illness as well, but as you'll go on to see in a minute. But he certainly knew a great sense of spiritual darkness and of a need for deliverance and things were not good for him in his heart.

There was great sadness in his life. And he speaks in verse 5 of being tearful or this weeping that lasts for a night.

[2 : 24] And also in verse 11 he says, Be merciful Lord to me, hear my cry. You've turned my wailing and my sackcloth that we just sung there and speaks about that having changed.

But there's no doubt that that was his experience. It was a dark experience for him in his life. A low time, if we look at low times and high times in our lives.

Well, this was a real low time for David. And when he gives these experiences in the Psalms, he does so in relating his own experiences with God.

So it's a spiritual darkness that he's going through. And I suppose it could be summed up in the fact that his heart with silent verse 12 he gives thanks that his heart can sing to the Lord and not be silent because that seemed to be the case for him.

That his heart, that is his soul, the depth of his being, all that he was spiritually, whatever we call, whatever we regard ourselves as spiritually, we could sum up and sing our heart.

[3 : 29] His heart was silent before God. And there was a flatness, a blankness, a lifelessness about his relationship with God spiritually that he is recalling that he's looking back to here in the Psalm.

And these may be experiences that you are also familiar with that there's maybe just a trough in your life.

And as a Christian, you can relate that trough to a spiritual dryness and a silent heart. You're not really in any sense vibrant.

You're not in any sense near God. If we take the heart to be the very core of our spiritual beings, that part of our beings is just not operating.

It's a long time since we cried out to God, long time since we were in relationship with God, long time since we really spoke to Him with any sense of realness and any sense of joy and any sense of meaning so that we feel silent.

[4 : 37] It can be just so that we're living our lives on a different dimension. You know, if our spiritual life just takes us through all deeper, then we can be living on a shallow, a kind of a much more mundane plane where we're just living from day to day without any real spiritual life whatsoever.

There's a silence spiritually about us. We're talking plenty maybe and we're maybe even coming to church and we're going through the motions. But we know in our hearts that God is very far away for whatever reason.

And maybe you can sympathize with what David was remembering here in this Psalm. Well, why was he feeling like that?

And what was the occasion behind him feeling this way? Well, the reason that he was feeling this way was because he says in verse 7, God had hidden his face.

Lord, when you favored me, you made my mountain stand firm, but when you hid your face, I was dismayed. So there was a... God had turned his face, His favor away from David.

[5 : 48] Why was that the case? Why was that the case in David's life? Well, I want us to read a passage from 2 Samuel chapter 24.

So, also recorded in 1 Chronicles 21. And most commentators believe that this is the historical situation that gave rise to this Psalm, Psalm 30.

And it's when David takes a census of the fighting men of Israel. Now, you might think, so, there's nothing wrong with that. But it seems that in this situation, there was something wrong with it. I'm going to read some of the verses and then jump on to some other ones. Again, it's on page 332. Again, the anger of the Lord burned against Israel, and he incited David against them, saying, Go and take a census of Israel and Judah.

So the king said to Job and the army commanders with him, Go throughout the tribes of Israel from Dan to Beersheba, and enroll the fighting men so that I may know how many there are.

[6 : 48] But Job, the king's commander, replied to the king, May the Lord your God multiply the troops a hundred times over, and may the eyes of my Lord the king see it.

But why does my Lord the king want to do such a thing? That is, take a census. The king's word, however, overruled Job and the army commanders. So they left the presence of the king to enroll the fighting men of Israel.

And then if we go on to verse 9 after they had done that, Job reported the number of the fighting men to the king. In Israel, there were 800,000 able-bodied men who could handle a sword, and in Judah, 500,000.

Then we're told David was conscience-stricken after they had counted the fighting men, and he said to the Lord, I have sinned greatly in what I have done. Now, Lord, I beg you, take away the guilt of your servant.

I have done a very foolish thing. Before David got up the next morning, the word of the Lord had come to God, to prophet David Sear. Go and tell David, this is what the Lord says, I am giving you three options.

[7 : 53] Choose one of them for me to carry out against you. This is by way of discipline and judgment. So God went to David and said, Shall there come upon you three years of famine, three months of fleeing from your enemies while they pursue your three days of plague in your land?

Now then, think over and decide how I should answer the one who sent me. David said to God, I am in deep distress. Let us fall into the hands of the Lord, for his mercy is great, but do not let me fall into the hands of men.

So the Lord sent a plague on Israel from that morning until the end of the time designated, and 70,000 of the people from Dan, Kuber Sheba, died. When the angel stretched out his hand to destroy Jerusalem, the Lord was grieved because of the calamity and said to the angel, who is afflicting the people, enough, withdraw your hand.

The angel of the Lord was then at the threshing floor of Aruana, the Jebusite. And David saw the angel who was striking down the people, said to the Lord, I am the one who has sinned and done this wrong, there but sheep.

What have they done? Let your hand fall upon me and my family. So we have this very difficult, very unusual situation where we see and recognize that God had hidden His face from David.

[9 : 15] God was already angry with the people of Israel for whatever reason. And we see here this situation that is made known to the people.

And so we recognize that David had ceased to trust in the Lord and ceased to rely on the Lord. In Psalm 30 verses 6 and 7, we get a picture of what was wrong in David's life.

When I felt secure, I said, I shall never be shaken. Oh Lord, when you favour me, you made my mountains stand firm. So there was this reality in David's life where he had become completely self-reliant.

He said, I am completely secure. I am the king of Israel. I am doing exactly what I want. I have all these massive armies under my control and I don't need God anymore.

We know that David did that at different occasions in his life. He abused his trust and his belief and his dependence on God and he became self-reliant. We saw that when he should have been leading the men, fighting them against God's enemies.

[10:30] But he was kind of slobbering about on the rooftop of his palace. That's when he saw Bathsheba and that's when he lusted for her. That's when he slept with her and then murdered her husband and all the problems that came from that period of self-reliance.

Here's another period of self-reliance when he looks at himself as the king and he looks at these great people around him and he doesn't seem to feel any need for God against him. He takes the senses.

He is brought to that place where he sees the need for a senses to take a seat. Why does he do that? It's not made clear in Scripture but maybe it was because he was proud and he wanted to show off how many people he had at his fingertips to fight armies.

Or maybe it was that he was planning future battles that God neither sanctioned or wanted him to take. But he was going to show off his might and his strength and his power by sending his people out to battle.

We don't know really exactly why the senses were so wrong on this occasion. But we do know that the motivation was self-reliant, that he had no time for God and that he wasn't dependent on God anymore.

[11:42] He was self-secure and he didn't think he was ever going to be shaken. I will never be defeated. I will never be broken down. And that led to this disobedient act of taking a senses in his pride.

And it also led to astonishing punishment. Very difficult passage. But we recognise that this was God's judgment on the people for whatever had made God angry with them.

And it was also God's judgment on David because they had broken the covenant. They had broken faith. They had broken trust. They had returned to idols. They had gone their own way.

They were no longer faithful in what they were doing in their relationship with God. And as a result, God hid his face from them. God poured out his judgment on them.

But was merciful in that he stopped. And he stopped at a place, at a threshing floor. The angel of the Lord stopped there.

[12:51] And at that place, David then built a sacrifice and it was also the place, the site for the temple, which later on becomes the song for which it was written for the dedication of the temple.

So we have this reality in David's life that God had hidden his face because he'd become self-reliant and was going his own way.

And I wonder again as we live our lives if that is how we feel. I know we're in different days. I know we're post-cross days. We're post-calvary.

Now post-atonement days. Post-propitiation days when God's wrath has been poured out on his Son. But nonetheless, in our relationship with God, can it be that we are struggling spiritually and there's always a link between our spiritual struggles and our self-reliance?

So that if we have no longer any reliance on God and any dependence on God and any real relationship with God that we will find that God turns from us. We grieve his spirit. We quench his spirit.

[14:09] We resist his spirit in our lives. And there's very little sense of God's closeness. There's a silence in our hearts reflected by the turning of God's face from us.

And I wonder if that's how you find yourself this evening in your life, that God is far from you.

And if you're honest, and if maybe I am honest in my own heart, that it is because we've become self-reliant. It's very much going back in a sense to last week when we looked at the way things after the revival in the AMI's day went a bit pear-shaped. It's also linked a little bit this morning to Thomas and to that principle of an unbelief, that tendency to unbelief in our heart.

And that ongoing picture of a tended garden that we need to keep in our minds if we are believers dependent on grace, relying on the Holy Spirit, trusting on the free, favour and mercy of God. But at the same time if we have lost sight of our responsibility in grace and with his cooperation to tend our spiritual lives, to root out sin, to deal with things that are displeasing to God, then we will find that we again move towards, we tend towards unbelief, practical unbelief.

[15 : 50] That is a lack of rest and confidence in God, which means that we become self-reliant. And we need to stop sometimes and take stock of our lives and ask ourselves, is that what is happening to us?

Is that or has that been what has happened? We've become self-reliant again. Maybe we'll look back to one point when God did great work in our lives and when he redeemed us and saved us. But for all intents and purposes where we are now is that we no longer are childlike in our faith, no longer reliant and no longer close to Him. We've become self-contained and self-preserving and we feel that we're secure and that, well, nothing will really move us. We're doing fine.

And God is no longer in the picture of our lives and of our hearts and we no longer seek His mercy. We no longer cry for repentance. We no longer are aware of sinfulness that may be in our experience.

Then we may find ourselves relating in some way, at least to David in the Psalm, because this Psalm has been written retrospectively by David as he looks back on God's mercy and on God's dealings with him in mercy and how he responded to God's discipline, God's judgment and God's covenant with him.

[17 : 20] Well, we recognise that David here did what we also must do in an ongoing way. He called out to God, to you, O Lord, I cried in verse 8. I cried for mercy.

Verse 2, O Lord, my God, I called to you for help and you healed me. It's very basic. It's A, B, C of our Christian experience, but I honestly don't think we get beyond that.

I don't think we can graduate from it. It's the only thing that enables us to deal with pride and unbelief and a tendency not to trust and self-reliance and a false security.

Is that we call out to the Lord and we cry out to Him when we feel in the spiritual depths, in that darkness, in that silence, in that spiritual grave that we find ourselves in so often in our lives, that we come back to God and that we pray to God. Prayer is absolutely everything for us in our Christian lives, in our church, in our homes, in our families, in our individual lives.

If we don't pray, I'm just wondering what it's saying to God. What does it say about what we think of God? What does it say about our dependence on God?

[19 : 01] What kind of marriage would it be if a husband and wife never spoke to each other? What kind of family would it be if children never had any communication in any form with their parents?

It would be what we would regard as dysfunctional. And we can apply the same truth at every level of human relationships in the workplace, in the university classroom, in the school room, wherever, where there is no sense of communication.

There is dysfunction there somewhere. And that is surely true of us spiritually, that if we are not calling out as needy children to our master, to our saviour, then we have to wonder what kind of spirituality we have, what kind of Christianity we have, what kind of relationship we have with God. If we are never speaking to Him, can we honestly claim to be Christians? Can we claim to belong to the God that we never have time for in prayer?

I stake my life and my ministry on the certainty of prayer in the life of the believer. It is absolutely essential that we not just ritualistically, but these are expressions of desperation, of need, and of a real crying out to a living God who will transform and change David's life.

[20 : 51] And when we do so, we will experience the same kind of spiritual reality that David experienced in his life.

He was calling out to God and crying out to God for his mercy. And verse 8, to you, O Lord, I called, to the Lord, I cried for mercy.

And we know from this, Sam, as it goes on, he experienced that mercy, that love and that deliverance. It is an amazing expression of his trust in God that he cries out for mercy in the light of what was happening at that time in 2 Samuel 24, where God took 70,000 people's lives.

But he wanted to be under God's mercy. And he knew that there was a reason for what God was doing. Great mystery, though it is for us, great mystery of the wrath of God against sin.

Yet he knew that there was hope, not just for him, but for God's people through this act of judgment that would bring repentance and a change and renewal.

[22 : 08] And that mercy that we experience is the greatest reality in the world. And it ought to be our greatest reality, and it ought to change our lives entirely.

Because we see both in the light of this passage and with the light of Scripture, the reality of God's wrath against our sin, but also the reality of his mercy and taking that sin and punishing it on the person of his own son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

And that while there is a reality of mercy, even in the passage we read, there is also the need for sacrifice. Because David sets up an altar at a place where the angel stops the judgment, because there is still this need for sin to be atoned for.

And was it that the people had just simply stopped recognizing that? They stopped seeing that God was both a merciful but also a just God. And that there was a re-establishment of a sacrifice where they recognized that they were reliant on his mercy and reliant on a future saviour who would take away the need for the blood of bulls and of goats every year to take away sin.

But our hope is in God's mercy. It is the greatest reality that we experience in our lives. It's the greatest imaginable experience that we can know, is that God is merciful to us through Jesus Christ.

[23 : 44] And we will not know that experimentally that is in our own lives, unless we call out with a recognition of our need and with a recognition of him being the only source of mercy for us.

I do worry sometimes for myself and maybe for all of us in having been brought up, most of us in Christian homes and with Christian truth, and with these words just tripping off our tongue so easily that we really have lost sight of their reality and of their power for us.

And it's all just a bit casual. And I think the only answer to that is to look to God and to ask Him to help us to realize the reality of these things.

And particularly when we are going through bleak experiences, to allow these experiences to speak to us of a God who delivers, and of a God who cares, and of a God who loves.

Because the experience is mercy and he also has a great expectancy for the future, as he recognizes, I think even in the choice that he makes in 2 Samuel 24, with regard to the plagues, that he recognizes that God's wrath or anger lasts only a moment, but His favour lasts a lifetime, weeping may remain for a night, but rejoicing comes in the morning.

[25 : 17] An amazing insight into the character and the nature of God for, shall we say, all of humanity in all of time.

There is a sense in which our lives here and now will undergo darkness and there will be weeping. Even if it's a lifelong experience, it's only for a night.

In the sense that this period of sin, this period of brokenness from Genesis 3, from the garden, and the womb of the garden, to the end time when Christ will return, that that period is in a sense just like one night of weeping, but that His grace and His favour lasts eternally before, how can you say eternally before and after?

Because it doesn't make sense. You're using chronological language to speak about non-chronological time-based realities, but if you see what I mean, there's only this window of weeping and darkness in which we are living at this time, but when we trust in Christ, we recognize by His nature, by His very character, that rejoicing and favour and blessing is His eternal state, and the eternal state in which we will live when we trust in Him. There's a great expectancy of a future of freedom from trouble and darkness and silence and sin and brokenness that we look forward to.

And that is a great hope for us. I know it doesn't maybe seem very realistic when we, especially when you're younger, and you think you're 20 and you're getting maybe by God's grace another 60, 70 years to live, and you think that's ages, but in the light of eternity, these momentary troubles that Christen speaks about are going to be massively outweighed by the weight of glory that we will enjoy with Him in heaven.

[27 : 35] So there's this sense in which only through God can we put all of life's experiences into perspective and have an expectancy and a hope for the future.

And that should lead us in our lives to enthusiastic praise in verses 11 and 12, which we eventually sung together, was that you turned my mourning, or my wailing into dancing, you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, so that my heart may sing to you and not be silent, oh Lord my God, I will give you thanks forever.

David, King David, have in this recognition of eternal life that would be His, and that he would have this thankfulness and that praise in his life and in eternity.

And this is not a great picture of changing clothes from sackcloth to a joyful attire, and the whole demeanour changing, and the whole way of life changing, and moving from a funeral procession and a mournful procession to a wedding procession to some more happy and joyful, and that this is the reality of David, who has gone through this experience, who knows and who understands that he's been saved from death in order to praise God, not just in this life but in eternity.

And you know, he argues with God at that point, you know, or before it, he says, what gain is there in my destruction, in my going down to the pit? Will the dust praise you? Will it proclaim your faithfulness? Oh Lord, hear and be merciful to me, oh Lord, be my help.

[29 : 22] So there's a sense where he says, please, please redeem me, please bring me out of this situation. Please help me know your forgiveness so that I can praise you, because it's no good if I just lose everything, lose my faith and lose my life and lose everything, because there'll be no sense of thanksgiving that can be offered up to you from me in that situation.

And praise, genuine praise is moulded from very often harsh experience, from not necessarily harsh circumstances, although it can be, just from a realising where we've wrestled with God as to our need and our darkness and our self-centredness and all that separates us from our God and all that practical atheism that we spoke about, that tendency to unbelief.

And when we wrestle with that and work through it and now his light to shine into the darkness of our hearts, and when we know his forgiveness and his hope and his mercy and his love and the future, then that really does mould our praise and bring our praise to life.

It really brings a sense of giving God glory. And when we sing together, when we praise and when we worship together, it's testimony. There ought to be testimony to why we are praising.

It's testimony for who God is and for what he's done in our life, and that we offer that back to him with great enthusiasm and with great liberty and with great joy.

[31 : 03] So it comes from within and is expressed more than being a reaction to what's nice around us and what's nice sounding and everything else. It's much more a deep-seated, inward response to spiritual life and wrestling with God.

And the conclusion is that David was able to write this Psalm, and it was for the dedication of the temple and for the renewal of sacrifice and for reviving of the people in many ways, and written in such a way that others would be encouraged, where he says in verse 4, to them, sing to the Lord, you saints of His, praise His holy name.

So you know, those who were there to sing His praises didn't need to necessarily go through His experiences, but nonetheless they could be encouraged by what David was saying and by what David was recounting and recalling, and would encourage them to give praise in their lives and in their hearts to the living God.

And that's very much what Scripture is for us. We don't necessarily need to go through the heights and the depths of experiences of some of the saints of God's Word, although we may, but they are given to us so that we can be encouraged by them to praise His holy name and recognize Him for who He is.

And love, when it's rekindled as it was for David, is always infectious. It always has this great inspirational power, not only to tell about what God has done in this kind of way, but also to share it with others.

[32 : 40] And there's the great power in personal experience shared, personal experience of God. And again, you know, why is it that we're so reticent to share our personal experience of God's deliverance and of God's help in our lives?

Is it possibly because we don't have much and we've gone silent, our heart is silent, find it hard to be spiritual? I want to do something slightly different on Wednesday night at the prayer meeting. I want to ask you to come along, I have to tell you, there'll be no one there. I'm going to ask you to come along, and if you want to share with those who are there a personal experience of how God has delivered you, how God has answered your prayers, how God has taken you through a dark experience, a testimony, not so much a testimony of new life, but a testimony as a Christian of what God has done.

We'll maybe look at another Psalm very briefly. And I'll maybe think of something that I can share, start a ball rolling. But we come along and think about that, because there's a great encouragement in it.

There's a great encouragement when we share with one another the reality of what God has done in our lives, how God has redeemed us, how God has changed us, how God has taken us back, how God has removed the silence from our lives and the struggles in our lives and has brought us back.

[34 : 10] Because David was a believer and had been a believer for a long time here. This is not a conversion experience we're speaking about, but it's good to be built up in each other through the faith that is shared.

Obviously, don't knock on, because we're doing that. No one will be forced to say anything, and if nobody says anything then we'll just have more time to pray.

And maybe that's what we'll need. And maybe there'll be a reflection within that, that well, why is it that we have no experience to share of God's deliverance and God's grace and God's mercy?

And I'm well aware that it may be too personal to share. Of course that's the case. It's not a taller reflection on our hearts at that level. But it may be something to consider for you to think about.

Because undoubtedly these times of testimony and sharing as Christians of a specific help and deliverance from God are greatly encouraging to us.

[35 : 16] The reminders of each other's faith, each other's struggles, and of God's dealings with us as real people in real situations with real faith.

And as we do so, that we would find ourselves praising God, that we would sing to the Lord, you saints of His, and praise His Holy Name, that we would have a new insight, not only from His Word, but from the experience of God working in our lives, of what He will do.

And may it be that we respond in the same way as David responded to his unique circumstances that made him feel as if he was in the very grave itself, that his heart was silent, and as God exposed it to him, that his heart had become self-reliant, puffed up, proud, and separated from his God.

And he no longer needed his God. And may we, if we find ourselves in that position, cry out in the same way as he did, and experience his mercy and all that goes with that. I do hope and pray that that might be our experience this evening.

Let's bow our heads and pray. Heavenly Father, we pray Your blessing on Your Word. We recognize the mystery of Your wrath and of Your dealings with Your people in the Old Testament in ways that aren't clearly explained in the Bible.

[36 : 50] We thank You that if there is mystery in Your character, otherwise You wouldn't be worthy of our worship. But we thank You that in the matter, on the issues that are of real importance to us, that we know exactly what is required of us.

We know the nature of our own hearts, and we know the path to life. May we tread that path wholeheartedly.

May we not be taken in and dazzled by this world, and by the sins, and the lifestyle of 21st Century Edinburgh, which may not be a lifestyle of where we are opposed in our faith and persecuted for our faith, like maybe our believer brothers and sisters in places like Turkey and China and in other parts of the world.

We maybe look at them sometimes and we think how hard it must be to be a Christian there. But yet Lord, there is such a subtle temptation to be unreliant, to be self-centered, to be self-reliant and secure in ourselves.

And the sins just are so tempting and easy to come by in our lives that maybe we are lulled into a spiritual backsliding and a coldness without really even recognizing it.

[38 : 33] Give us that determination to wrestle with You as individuals, to pray to You, to make the time to deal with our souls, just like any garden that needs to be well tended needs time.

For to remove the sin, the weeds and choke the growth, so may we spend the time exploring our hearts and praying to our God to root out and seek forgiveness for the sins that choke our growth and our fruitfulness and our experience of Your deliverance and our willingness to share that experience with one another.

Bless Wednesday evening to us and may we be simple and honest in our willingness to share God's ongoing dealings with us and may we learn from it and be encouraged by it and enthused. We ask these things calling out to you for Your mercy and for Your grace. In Jesus' name, Amen.