

Keeping Pain in Perspective

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- [0 : 00] Hello. I wonder how you celebrated going into the 1st of January this year. You know, normally it's a time of joy and looking forward to the new year. But I saw a bunch of memes this year that made me laugh, but that also captured that sense of apprehensiveness that many of us might be feeling going into the new year.
- And they bring home the reality of what we are going through at the moment. But, you know, it's not all bad. Here's one meme that captures the silver lining. For those working at Baragwanath Hospital in Soweto, it says, for the first time in its history, the Khrushani Baragwanath Hospital says it has had no trauma case patients coming through its doors on the 1st of January.
- And that was because of the lockdown in alcohol sales because of the coronavirus. But this is why we decided to do a series on the Psalms.
- They help us deal with the reality of living in a troubled world. We need to learn how to deal with that reality and to do it from a biblical perspective and to not get bogged down in despair.
- You know, one of the strengths of the Psalms is their almost unrelenting realism. The writers know all about the pain and the suffering and the hardships that we go through in life with being part of living in a broken world.
- [1 : 22] When you read the Psalms, you will read of feelings and emotions that run the whole gamut of the human experience. And when we look at our Psalms today, we see the Psalmist going through some really heavy experiences.
- And so let's just highlight those for a few minutes. Funny enough, the Psalmist feels like he's going through a drought and through deep waters almost at the same time. He's looking for God, but he can't find Him.
- And so we have an insight into what it feels like when God isn't there. He says this from verse 1, As a deer pants for flowing streams, so my soul pants for you, O God.
- My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and appear before Him? We often think of this imagery as a beautiful picture of piety, of wanting more of God.
- But the reality is you only pant after water when you don't have it. If you've ever been on a long hike and you're starting to get dehydrated, you'll know how that feels.
- [2 : 25] You get these headaches. You can't function properly. You stumble along the path. And really, you feel like giving up. And so someone who's dying of thirst because they can't find water, the Psalmist is saying he's feeling like that.
- He's dying inside from having a lack of God in his life. And he's almost at the breaking point. God feels so far away that his soul is all cracked up and dried up inside.
- You know, a parched plant is brittle and much easier to break. And that's what the Psalmist is feeling like without God in his life. At the same time, he's overwhelmed by his tears.

The only fluid he has available to him is expressed in tears. Verse 3, My tears have been my food day and night, while they say to me all the day long, Where is your God? Now, the only food he's got is his tears.

Imagine that. He doesn't have any other food. They're just rolling down his cheek, and that's the only water that he's getting. That's a lot of tears. So the pain is real and nearly overwhelming.

[3 : 34] And it's been carrying on for a long time. They've been my food day and night for a number of days or for a period of time. So God is far away. He's overwhelmed by his tears.

That's the only thing that he's got to keep him company. And then he's being taunted and persecuted by his enemies. On top of that, have a look at verse 10. As with a deadly wound in my bones, my adversaries taunt me.

While they say to me all the day long, Where is your God? You know, there's nothing like being kicked when you're down, is there? On top of feeling really down and lonely, this person has his enemies that are trying to do him in at the same time.

Maybe they're whispering behind his back or turning people against him, making false accusations, making life more difficult to cope with than it already is. Totally unnecessary. He doesn't seem to have any friends that can give him good counsel or lift his spirits.

He's facing all these adversaries alone. A little bit like some of us might be in the lockdown at the moment. So no wonder then the psalmist feels like he's drowning under all these problems that he's got to face.

[4 : 36] In verse 7, Deep calls to deep, At the roar of your waterfalls, all your breakers and your waves have gone over me. He's going through deep waters. The imagery is of the Jordan in full spate, probably with a spring thaw.

It arises on Mount Hermon and it's snow covered. And so in spring, all the waters rush down there. And the waters are boiling and teeming over. If you get caught in there, you're a goner.

So it gives you that feeling of being hit by wave after wave, unrelenting pressure trying to pull you down. And not being able to get your breath. One thing after the next.

So the psalmist is going through some really, really difficult times. Now there's a number of important lessons for us to grab hold of as we look to what 2021 holds for us.

Am I saying that the only reality is that the world is difficult and it's going to be a hard year? I don't know if it will be or it won't be. But first thing to grab hold of is that the psalms deal with the reality of pain.

[5 : 42] The fact that the psalms deal with the reality of pain validates the feelings and experiences that we go through. Many of us have already gone through these hard times and experienced in a particularly sharp way the sting of grief, of physical injury, of sickness or rejection.

Reading the psalms tells us that godly people do go through difficult times. And so our experience doesn't fall outside of what it means to be a Christian.

Pain is part of normal Christian living. And having to deal with things like disappointment and rejection and loss is a normal part of the Christian life.

Just knowing that and knowing that god knows that gives us a sense of comfort. We're not alone. But that alone doesn't give us the answer. But there's another thing that we need to realize as well.

And that I call we must be careful of falling into the trap of denialism. You can't deny that this person is going through hard times and it's written by God in his word. So he knows that we're going to go through these things.

- [6 : 52] We must be careful of not falling into the trap of denialism. That is, that God wants us to feel blessed and happy and healthy and successful all of the time. And that if there's a mere hint of trouble on the horizon or of opposition, we overreact and deny its power.
- We instantly claim victory or rebuke it as a work of Satan. Dealing with pain in our lives mustn't look like pretending it's not there. You know, that's only going to lead to more pain.
- Yes, God blesses us. Yes, we can enjoy all the good things that God promises. And the psalmist is looking forward to that time again. But we still have to deal with the reality of living in a world that doesn't work properly.
- You know, not even Jesus could escape the pain of living in the troubled world. You know, it was hard for him knowing what he was going to go through. But of course, it's good news for us.
- Just look at the anguish he knew he was about to go through from John chapter 12. Jesus is looking forward to being glorified. Verse 23, Jesus replied, The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.
- [8 : 01] Okay, great. He's going to receive all this glory. At the end of the passage, Jesus says, Father, glorify your name. And so he knows it's going to happen. But just look at what he's got to go through to get there.
- Very truly, I tell you from verse 24, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds.
- Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, my servants also will be.
- My Father will honor the one who serves me. Now my soul is troubled. Echoes of Psalm 42 and 43. And what shall I say?
- Father, save me from this hour? No. No. It was for this very reason I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name. That's what you call inner strength.
- [9 : 00] That's what you call faith. Jesus knows that he will be glorified, but he also knows what he has to go through in order to get there. And he's indicating that his followers will travel the same path as him.
- That we'll all go through the same experience. And then thirdly, and this next point is the main point that we need to consider, is that the psalmist wants us to grab hold of a number of lifelines.
- So you feel like you're drowning. You feel like you're going down. You feel like you're in a drought. You're on a mountainside and you need to be rescued. There's a number of lifelines that will help keep pain and trouble in perspective and steer us toward God and to cling on to hope.
- To help us see that although pain is real, it's not the only reality. And so the first lifeline is grabbing hold of God himself.
- The first lifeline is God himself. I'll just look at verse 1 and 2 again. The psalmist is longing after God. Verse 2, my soul thirsts for God, for the living God.
- [10 : 05] And that refrain that occurs again and again throughout the psalm, almost like a chorus in a song. Psalm 42, verse 5 and verse 11. And again, it ends it in Psalm 43.
- Why are you cast down, O my soul? And why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God, for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God. And so for the psalmist, the answer to his problem and to pain is God, and only God will do.

You know, when trying to assuage the pain in our life, we turn to so many bad things that simply cannot heal that wound or fill that gap that we want. The things that we find ourselves in the created world around us, these things in and of themselves are not designed to heal completely.

We cannot take the things in the created world and turn them into our own personal savior. Yes, they can help, but they can't ultimately save us. They simply cannot carry the weight that we place on them.

They're not designed to do that. The only being powerful enough in the universe is the God who made us. And he's both powerful and wise enough to deal with our longing and loss without becoming part of the problem.

[11 : 17] We call him our father for a reason. He is like the perfect parent. You know, when we get into trouble, they're able to sympathize and they're powerful enough to effect change, to help us and to save us, but they don't get caught up in our own tizziness, our own problems as a small child.

At the same time, our parents are wise and independent enough not to be caught up in our pain and not to be caught out by our manipulation. And God, our Heavenly Father, is exactly like that.

Because we are made in His image, in the end, the only person who can truly help us is God Himself. The first lifeline we must grab hold of is God. But for the psalmist, He seems so far away.

When will I meet you again? I'm thirsting after you because I don't have you. Where are you? So how do we do that? How do we grab hold of God when He's not there for us or doesn't feel like He's there for us?

We'll get to that in a second. But then there's a second lifeline. And it's not a particularly obvious one. It's an easily overlooked one, actually. But the second lifeline is the community of God's people gathered in worship.

[12 : 29] Have a look at verse 4. These things I remember as I pour out my soul. How I would go with the throng and lead them in procession to the house of God with glad shouts and songs of praise and a multitude keeping the festival.

And then in Psalm 43 again, he can't wait to let God lead him to his holy hill and to his dwelling. That he will go to the altar of God, to his joy, and that he will sing God with the praises, with the lyre, with the music.

And so the community of God's people in worship, it's so easy to overlook because it seems like such a small and almost ineffectual thing compared to having God Himself.

And yet, God doesn't want us to really lose ourselves in His presence and get caught up in mystical contemplation. He also gives us ordinary, everyday things that really do have an impact on our experience of the world we live in.

And for the Christian, this means going on a regular basis to church. Church is part of the coping tools, coping mechanisms that God gives us to help keep pain in perspective.

[13 : 43] And going to church often acts in a kind of unobtrusive way, if you think about it. I mean, sometimes you go to church and you're deeply moved. Sometimes you go to church and it's just an ordinary, everyday service. But it's the steady feeding of God's Word and of meeting with His people and having your faith affirmed, of hearing God's Word, of hearing His truth said over and over again, of hearing of what God has done for me, and of hearing of the hope that I have.

And all these things keep me on a much more even keel than if I were trying to deal with the pain all by myself. You know, it's like taking vitamin C before you get sick, preventative medicine, or exercising in order to stay strong.

You do those things in order to be strong enough for the time when you need them. Going to church builds up your faith, your spiritual coping skills, before you run into trouble, so that you are more ready and more able to deal with the problems when they do arrive.

Connecting with God's community in worship is one of the best ways of connecting with God Himself. So don't overlook the importance of going to church. Now, we can't do that.

So how do you hang on to these lifelines when they're not available to you, or when it doesn't feel like they're available to you? Well, the third lifeline is the psalmist reminds himself again and again of the truth of God.

[15 : 11] You've got to tell truth to yourself. You've got to talk back to yourself. So here's him reminding himself in verse 4. These things I remember as I pour out my soul.

How I would go with the throng and lead them in procession. So he's reminding himself of something that he had. Verse 6. My soul is cast down within me.

Therefore, I remember you from the land of Jordan and of Hermon from Mount Mizzar. He's reminding himself that he's in the promised land, that God has given him, made promises and delivered on them already. And then there's the refrain of verse 5 that occurs again and again.

Why are you cast down, O my soul? It's him talking to himself. Why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God. For I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God.

And so in the face of trouble, the psalmist reminds himself of things that are true. Things that help keep the pain at bay, that make it bearable. So part of the problem when we go through trials and difficulties, they seem, it's the most immediate thing.

[16 : 14] And it blocks us from seeing the reality of God. That's why we've got to get into the art and the practice of telling truth to ourselves. We've got to talk to ourselves. Now I know when you do that, people will say you're crazy.

You know, people talking to themselves. I'm not saying you must do this and mutter it as long as you go walk down the street. But you've got to learn how to remind yourself of God's truth while you're going through the hard times.

There's a couple of truths the psalmist highlights for us. There's the truth of his past experience of worship in verse 4 which we've seen. And he reminds himself of the joy and the camaraderie. And that's real even if he cannot feel it now.

There's a sense that he's going to look forward to having that again. There's a truth that pain is not the only reality. Have a look at verse 8. Verse 7 is Yes, God's waves are breaking over me.

And notice that they're God's waves. They're not just waves that are out of the blue that are not controlled by God. But nevertheless they're still real and it feels like you're going down. But then in verse 8, By day the Lord commands his steadfast love and at night his song is with me.

[17 : 20] A prayer to the God of my life. And so God's love is real and even in the darkness of night God gives us reason to hope.

Then there's a truth that God will change their circumstances. In Psalm 43 verse 1 Vindicate me O God and defend my cause against ungodly people from the deceitful and unjust man.

Deliver me for you are the God in whom I take my refuge. Pain is real but it's only temporary. Evil is strong but God is stronger.

Vindication and release will come. And then there's the truth that trust in God is not futile but fruitful. That refrain that occurs again and again.

He hopes in God because he knows he will yet praise him. He will praise him again. That he is a God who saves. And not just that. that he is my God and that he saves me.

[18 : 21] There's just a couple of truths that the psalmist reminds himself about. He's talking back to himself. So the key in this psalm the key lifeline that we need to hold on to is the lifeline of reminding ourselves of God's truth of the truth of the world but from God's word.

We have to literally talk back to ourselves and remind us of these things especially when we're going through a difficult time. Notice how the psalmist again and again takes himself to task.

That refrain occurs throughout the psalm. Here's some translations that help us get a handle on what he's doing there. The message translation says this. Why are you down in the dumps dear soul?

Why are you crying the blues? Fix my eyes on God. Soon I'll be praising again. He puts a smile on my face. He is my God. The Living Bible says this.

But oh my soul don't be discouraged. Don't be upset. Expect God to act. For I know that I shall again have plenty of reason to praise him for all that he will do.

[19 : 27] He is my help. He is my God. And so talking back to oneself using the truth of scripture is such a helpful way to hold on to those lifelines when they seem like you can't reach out and get them.

Well here's how it might sound if I'm doing this to myself. So talking to your soul is like talking to yourself. You need to say this.

Hey Dylan don't get so low. Don't think the only thing that exists are your problems and your failures and your pain. Yes you feel like these things are true and you feel horrible inside right now but that's not the only reality.

God is far more real and far stronger than your problems. Don't place your hope for change in yourself or in others. Place your hope for change and help in God. Remember I'm still talking to myself.

This is only a season you're going through and seasons change. It will pass. You were happy before. You'll be happy again. God is with you now.

[20 : 33] He will save you from these problems and from these people who are bothering you. Don't overreact. Don't give in to despair. Don't listen to your feelings. Those feelings will leave you. Have faith in God.

Have faith in the God who saves. Have faith in the God who is yours and to whom you belong. You will get through this. God is your help and your hope and your salvation.

Trust Him. You will sing His praises with His people again. And then as you do that what you'll find is that your anxiety levels drop and then your anxiety levels drop but your faith increases.

And you create that breathing space. Almost opens up and you can peer into the reality behind what's happening in front of you. And you can see hope and light and future.

And what that does is it enables you to keep on getting on with the task at hand. We are not called to medicate the pain away nor run from it nor embrace it as the only truth out there.

[21 : 43] It is real but it is not the whole story. The Psalms consistently point us to the reality beyond our experience to God and to His goodness and to His promises.

A pastor friend posted this as his New Year's message and I thought it was so appropriate for us today. He says this, the existentialist part of me can relate with a book like The Plague by Albert Camus or with what is written in the book of Ecclesiastes.

But then I know there is also the reality of the birth narratives of the magi of the shepherds and the angels and a virgin who gives birth and this divine intervention changes everything.

The world doesn't have to find meaning in mere human activity and strife but there is something much bigger happening. A loving God is active in the world and the birth of Christ means that the outcome of the world will be determined by God and not by corruption.

Not by injustice or violence or fertility that is often so evident. And therefore, with meaning, I can say Happy New Year to you all as the New Year will also be the space in which grace and redemption can be enjoyed.

[22 : 59] So, end quote. So, as we end in, as we head into uncharted territory in 2021 and you find yourself in times of trouble, don't wait for Mother Mary to speak to you in a quote from Beatles song.

In order to find perspective, you would do far better to build these practices in your life that the psalmist has highlighted. Turn to and seek for God.

Turn to God's community and when you can't have that right now, talk back to yourself and remind yourself of the truths contained in God's Word.

Start with the Psalms and you will find rich reward for help for daily living. Well, let's pray for God to do that for us as we end our time together.

Heavenly Father, thank you for your Word and your truth. Lord, we don't know what 2021 will hold for us and we're apprehensive and worried about it.

[24 : 00] We're a little bit scared if we're honest. Father, please help us to cling on to you and be a real hope and help for us. Lord, help us to look forward to the time when we can come back to church and gather with your community again and to do that when it's available and safe to do so.

But Lord, help us to do what the Psalmist says, to take ourselves to task, to remind ourselves of the truths of your Word and your promises and your reality.

Be with us, Lord, by Christ and by your Holy Spirit. Amen.