

Songs of Experience

Psalms for the ups and downs of life

Introduction.

Throughout the centuries, God's people have sung about their faith. Some of the songs are joyful explosions of praise. Some are laments of great sorrow. Some are prayers of humble confession. Other songs declare who God is, and remind us of His character and promises. The book of Psalms expresses such songs, and challenges. Those who read them to have confidence in God, to trust and walk in hope. Sometimes they speak of deep laments, of heart wrenching cries, at other times they speak of profound joy. Whatever the mood we find ourselves in as we walk through life, the Psalms capture our words and feelings in a graphic way. They also encourage us to take steps in the right direction towards God.

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Study 1. Finding wisdom to live life.

Introduction.

People are fascinated by the future. Someone once said the past is a foreign country, but the future is an undiscovered one, but that doesn't stop folk wanting to explore it. However, over time, we learn that nobody can accurately predict future events. However Psalm 1 offers us a peek into the future. Here is a person who can predict the future of two people groups, one leads to deep satisfaction, the other to a restless barrenness in both heart and life.

A wide view

1. Why is there such a deep desire in the human spirit to know the future?
2. Do you know someone for whom this preoccupation dominates them? How does this affect their life?

Read Psalm 1

A Biblical view

3. In verses 1-3 the Psalmist paints a picture of a person who experiences a contented life. What characteristics mark this person's life?
4. What do we learn about the future of the 'wicked' from this psalm?
5. What contrast do you see between the two pictures?

Blessedness as the Bible describes it, is a heart condition of well-being and dignity, a calm assurance of self-worth. It is a vitality of spirit, a contentedness that you know that God is guiding, protecting, using, providing for you. It is a rock-solid confidence that God is in control.

6. To gain this quality of life, what are the sources of advice you need to avoid?
7. What do you think is involved in keeping yourself by God's stream of water?
8. How do you think your other group members could help and encourage you to stay by these streams?
9. What fruits do you see that the person who stays by the stream grows?

Barrenness is best described as the absence of God's peace. It suggests confusion in life, a meaninglessness, and a sense of despair.

Our view

10. If you have experienced a true blessedness from God, what would you say to a person who is still trapped in a barren life?

11. For the Psalmist the road of obedience leads into the abundance of God's blessings. What do you think are some of the factors that cause us to wander off the road of obedience?

12. How can your groups help you stay in the path?

13. One of the things which the Psalmist says will help us to stay on the path is delighting in God's Word. Why not take time this week to try and memorise Psalm 1.
If you can, try and notice any changes that happen in your life as a result of taking this path of obedience.

Study 2. Finding the value of life

Introduction

Distance changes your perspective on size. From 40,000 feet up in an aeroplane things look very different than when you are standing up close to them. When we measure earth in the perspective of the Universe we realise just how small it is, and then when we measure ourselves we begin to put ourselves in a proper perspective. However, in this Psalm, David recognises not only our frailty but also our value to God, it's His perspective, which ultimately counts.

A wide view

1. Describe a time when you had a sense of the vastness of creation. How did this make you feel about yourself in relation to the created order?

A Biblical view

Read Psalm 8

2. What does this Psalm teach us about

- a. The heavens and the earth?
- b. the God we follow?

3. How does David portray human beings

- A, in verse 4?
- b, in verses 5-8?

4. How do these portraits fit together?

It is only human beings who are created in the image of God. We are entirely different from anything else in the created realm. When God made us he created an expression of himself. The implications of being created in God's image are staggering.

5. What do you think it means to be made in the image of God?

6. Since every human being is created in God's image, how should this reality impact the following areas?

- a. How we respond to non-Christians
- b. How we respond to racism
- c. How we view ourselves.

7. What are some of the things that make us feel less important than others?

8. How can we battle against these lies?

9. What can we do to build up others and affirm their value as human beings?

Our view

God has given human beings dominion over creation, called us to be stewards of creation. God has given humans responsibility to care for the earth. The truth is that we matter to God so much that He has given us responsibilities over creation.

10. What is a responsibility God has given you in these areas.

- a. Using a spiritual gift to do ministry
- b. Caring for a person
- c. Supervising material resources
- d. Some other responsibility

11. How does having responsibilities remind you how much you matter to God?

Sessions 3

Finding God's goodness in life

Introduction.

To know that you have come close to death is an experience a person hardly ever forgets. When you think back to a close call you usually breath a sigh of relief. King David had many brushes with death, not only did he face lions and bears in the wilderness, he also dodges the spears that King Saul threw at him. At one point David was trapped in a city when King Abimelech the city's ruler wanted David dead. David feared for his life, and acted insane to persuade others to let him go.

A wide view

- 1.If you can tell about an experience you have had where you [or someone close to you] could have died?

2. How did you feel when you [or they] were spared?

A Biblical view

Read Psalm 34

3. This Psalm identifies many reasons for giving praise to God. What are one or two of the reasons listed in this Psalm that move you to praise?

- 4.David wrote this Psalm after he pretended to be insane, and barely escaped with his life from King Abimelech. With this context in mind how does this Psalm communicate the heart of a person who has just had a brush with death?

5. David begins this Psalm with a great explosion of praise. Vs. 1-3. What life situations bring you to a point where you are moved to a deep expression of praise?

6. There are many ways to express exaltation. The Bible talks about singing, playing instruments, writing psalms, what helps you to express worship?

7. What psalm, hymn, song, helps you to express your feelings of worship to God?

Our view

8. David expresses his personal faith in God in vs. 4-7. If you can, describe a time when God was the only One you could turn to, when He became your lifeline. How did this experience deepen your personal faith?

9. How does looking back on this experience create within you an attitude of gratitude?

10. Suppose a non-Christian looked you straight in the eye and said, 'I don't believe in all this talk about how good it is to be a Christian. Why don't you tell me from your personal experience, how God has shown His goodness to you.' What would you say?

11. How can you extend the invitation, 'Taste and see that the Lord is good' to a specific person in your life?

Session 4

Finding rest in God in life

Introduction

There are some lessons in life one learns the hard way. There are many times in life when we can feel very vulnerable. There are times when we can feel like a tottering fence on a storm-battering day. I can think of many times when a severe storm has nearly blown down a garden fence, and I've been struggling to secure the fence which had become loosely secured.

Author Scot Peak begins his book, *The Road less travelled*, with words 'Life is difficult.' So it is, and part of the challenge of life is to recognise this, and then do all one can to endure, and choose our attitude to respond.

A wide view

1. What is one life lesson you have learned the hard way?

Biblical view

Read psalm 62

2. In this Psalm we find statements like 'in God alone' and 'He alone'. What does this Psalm teach us about what 'God alone' offers?

3. In verses 9-12 we read warnings and promises. Put these in your own words

a. Warnings

b. Promises

4. In Psalm 62 the theme God only stands out. What marks the lives of the God only Christians you know?

5. What is standing in the way of you being more of a God only follower of Christ?

6. What is it going to take to tear down those barriers?

7. What can you do as a small group to challenge and inspire each other to be God only people?

Our view

Soon after this psalm David slipped into a *God and man* person. Such a person gets caught in the middle, they miss the joy of serving *God*, but they never fully throw themselves into the folly of a sinful life. They are caught in the middle, no heavenly thrills, and no hellish spills. This is not an easy way to live the Christian life.

8. What are some of the dangers and consequences of living a '*God and*' life?

9. In what areas of your life do you find this '*God and*' a challenge at present?

10. How can your group members help you as you seek to reject a '*God and*' and seek to live a '*God only*' lifestyle?

Session 5

Finding freedom from fear in life.

Introduction.

Virtually no one is a stranger to fear. Some of us deal with what we might call pestering fears that keep nagging at us. Things like will the dinner turn out Ok? Will the card arrive in time? However there are other fears pressing ones. These are the major fears. The rumour that redundancies are on the cards. The call from the Head teacher asking you to call in about your child's behaviour problems in the classroom. But there are the paralysing fears, which slam into your life. The death of a loved one, the uncertainty of a biopsy results. These kind of fears can destroy a life, and we need to find freedom from them.

Wide view

1. How have you experienced
a pestering fear
a pressing fear
a paralysing fear

2. Can you identify one fear you are facing right now?

Biblical view

Read Psalm 91.

3. This Psalm is filled with images and word pictures. What is one image that jumps out at you, and what does it teach you about God?

4. What message does this Psalm speak to those who are struggling with fear?

5. Psalm 91 is full of descriptions of the character of God, which can speak to our fears. The psalmist sees the might, power and love of God with crystal clarity. He describes God as a shelter, protector; the Most High. What is the one element of God's character that brings you courage and confidence?

6. How have you experienced freedom from fear because of this characteristic of God?

7. Describe if you can, a time you found yourself in a dangerous situation and God delivered you?

8. The psalmist speaks of being protected by angels. If you can tell of a time that you, or someone close to you, or you know, who felt supernaturally protected?

9. If you picture angels surrounding you as you face a fearful situation, how might this change your fear level?

Our View

10 Read verse 15 slowly. Can you see the difference between telling God about your fears and releasing your fears to God through prayer? Can you offer an example?

11. Can you give an example of a time when you gave a fear to God through prayer and experienced His peace and freedom from fear.

Session 6

Finding the greatness of God in life

Introduction

Sometimes it can take a couple of days into a holiday to begin to appreciate the break, but when that begins to happen then the feeling of, 'I wish I could do this for ever' begins to take over. One can begin to feel like a little child, who after something really exciting says 'again'. Here in this Psalm, the writer draws together in a superbly crafted poem much of the teaching on praise from the other Psalms

A wide view

1. Describe if you can a time in your life when you felt 'I could do this for ever'?

A Biblical view

Read Psalm 145

2. After reading the Psalm how do you think David would answer the following questions.

- a. What causes you to say, 'I could do this forever'?
- b. what is it about God's character that makes you praise Him?

3. What does this psalm teach us about

- A. who God is?
- B. what God does?
- C. how we should respond to God?

3. When David explodes in praise he describes God's unreachable and unfathomable greatness

How have you witnessed God's greatness in the following

- a. Creation?
- B in the life of a follower of Christ?
- c. in the church?

4. How have you seen God reveal His power and greatness in your life?

5. God has an intrinsic inclination of goodness to us, which is bound up in his identity of who He is. What has God done to prove his goodness to you?

6. Do you ever place conditions on God's goodness, expecting Him to be good in the exact way you want Him to be?

7. If God has proved his goodness over and over again, why do we find ourselves waiting for his goodness to run out?

8. David worships the father for being a glorious God. How does getting a glimpse of God's glory move you to worship?

Our view

9. David knew what it was to fall into the depths of sin. He also knew what it was to experience God's gracious forgiveness. In grace, God gives us gifts we do not deserve. What are some of the gifts of grace God has given to you?

10. What is one way to declare and express your praise for God's greatness as an individual that you have never done before? As a group what can you do?