

## *The Psalms, day-by-day (written 2023)*

### Day 1 – Psalm 1 ‘The Tree’

The bible is full of rich images of what it means to truly live in the abundant life of God. Psalm 1 describes one such (particularly good) image: the tree. Our lives were designed by God to be like a tree.

I must confess that I love trees. I love being close to them, just standing in their presence, admiring their size, their beauty, their dignity. Trees are one of the greatest parts of God’s creation. They heal, they shelter, they stand strong and firm in all weather. They just *are*. Or rather, they have been, they are and they will be. That sense of majestic permanence is part of their appeal.

God calls us to be like that: trees which reflect his glory. Psalm 1 shows us why and how. First, *we need roots*. This psalm places our roots firmly in the Word of God – v2 delighting in ‘the law of the Lord’ – *and* the Spirit of God. The biblical image of water in v3 usually connects with God’s presence, so this tree planted by a stream can easily be understood to mean one who is constantly refreshed by the water of God’s presence – his Spirit.

Second, *we bear fruit*. We all know that spring is coming when the buds appear on trees – as they are at the moment. In summer those buds blossom into leaves and even fruit. A tree ‘yields its fruit in season’ (v3). So should our lives. Nourished by Word and Spirit, we stand where we are and bear fruit for our Lord.

Finally, this Psalm contrasts the rootedness and fruitfulness of such a person with the alternative. Those who do not go deep with God ‘are like chaff that the wind blows away.’ (v4) Blown here and there by wherever the current of our culture leads, such lives ultimately cannot prosper. They may flower for a while, but the shaking of the wind proves fatal.

If you can, take a moment today to find a tree and spend time admiring it. God is calling *you* to be such a tree: rooted in his Word, nourished by his Spirit, fruitful, strong and dignified. You probably don’t feel much like that – none of us do – but by His amazing grace, that is what we can all become.

Reading Psalm 1 today, how might you keep growing into this beautiful calling?

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### **Day 2 – Psalm 2 ‘The Son’**

In 2022, I fulfilled a long-held dream of feeding a peregrine falcon. The peregrine has an almost mythical reputation – the world’s fastest creature, a devastating combination of grace, power and savagery... and there it was, perched on my wrist, eating a dead chick. Up close it is astonishingly beautiful, but as it fed quietly with only the occasional fluttering of wings, I was still aware of its immense power and vitality. Frankly, I was in awe. It is a memory I will treasure for life.

I think the peregrine illustrates perfectly a theological idea which troubles many people. How do we reconcile the fearsome God of the Old Testament with what we read in the New? The answer lies in the distance from which we view a thing. If we can get up close and personal, our perspective can change radically.

Take today’s Psalm, for example, which is about the Son of God. It is a wonderful and important prophetic passage, as evidenced by its use by the early church in prayer (Acts 4) and by Paul in one of his keynote evangelistic sermons (Acts 13), who clearly identifies him as Jesus. But this Son, as portrayed in Psalm 2, is someone to be feared: ‘He terrifies them in his wrath’ (v5); ‘celebrate his rule with trembling’ (v11). We may find this an uncomfortable comparison with the Jesus we picture in our mind: to which we can say two things.

First, we need to beware a distorted view of Jesus. Gentleness is not weakness – it is strength under control. From the Gadarenes who pleaded with him to leave their region, to the crowd which fell down in awe at his arrest, the real Jesus of the gospels unsettles many people. Jesus the Son is more like the Son of Psalm 2 than we might wish to admit.

Second, to return to our peregrine, it’s the difference between viewing from afar and viewing close-up. The Old Testament is true: but it understands the Lord, as it were, from a distance. Once ‘the Word becomes flesh’ we can see what the Son looks like close-up. The same fearsome power is there, but we can also see these ‘fearsome’ qualities more clearly through the lens of grace, of gentleness, of sacrifice. We see the Son fully as he is.

A final thought for today: this Psalm is primarily addressed to worldly leaders. It is they who are encouraged to kiss the Son, and not to incur his wrath. The point is that, in the bible, leadership is *always* a delegated authority. All human leaders are answerable to the ultimate Leader – to the Lord himself. Let’s pray today for our leaders: that they would be conscious of their task under God, and would rule with integrity, justice and mercy. And for us, an encouragement: ‘Blessed are all who take refuge in him.’ (v12) Amen!

**Day 3 – Psalm 3 ‘The Shield’**

During the pandemic, we all learned some new words which became key parts of our language. Self-isolating, social distancing, PPE... and shielding. The idea that we have vulnerable loved ones who we need to protect by restricting our own behaviour was one of the great sacrificial acts of service performed by millions around our country, and no doubt across the world.

Although the shield (in the classic sense we understand it) stopped being used in most forms of warfare centuries ago, the idea lives on, and we immediately know what is meant. Captain America has one, there's a whole US TV series called by the name, and footballers are taught how to 'shield' the ball. A shield protects the person or object which is under attack.

But when we need protection, where do we look? In Psalm 3, King David is in real danger. His son has usurped the throne in a coup and David has fled for his life. He lacks allies and support – where does he look for help? 'But you, Lord, are a shield around me, my glory, the One who lifts my head high.' (v3) David has nowhere else to turn: only God can protect him, *shield* him, now.

In these uncertain times, we too look around for protection. During the pandemic, to some degree we found it in the practical steps we took to minimise the risk of infection. But, whether in pandemic or (just) out of it, life remains precarious: where can we turn for help? This Psalm encourages us that we have a better place to run, a deeper truth to receive, a bigger shield in play. The Lord can be our shield.

It's not magic, or a slot machine. Most of us caught COVID-19 at some point, and tragically many of us know someone who died of it. Our divine shield is not a guarantee of survival. But it *is* a source of confidence, of peace, of the hope that bigger things are at play. In the kingdom of God, sickness does not have the last word, even as Absalom's armies did not in the time of King David. May we too, like David, declare this truth over our lives, and the lives of those we know, and may it cause us to find hope and peace today: 'From the Lord comes deliverance. May your blessing be on your people.' Amen.

## *The Psalms, day-by-day (written 2023)*

### Day 4 – Psalm 4 ‘The Answer’

‘Answer me when I call!’ I remember, as a teenager, my parents shouting this a fair few times to me, as I cocooned myself away in my room. And occasionally even now, immersed in my study, my wife sometimes has to!

There are times, too, when we feel moved to say this to the Lord. One of the great blessings of following Christ is that we can pray anytime, anywhere; that our ‘Father in the heavens’ is listening. But we’ve all experienced those seasons when it seems that our prayers are not being answered. We know that the Lord is righteous – as does David, our Psalmist (v1) – and we know that he loves us... so why isn’t he answering?

Today’s Psalm vocalises that dilemma, and reminds us that we are in good company. King David had times like this, too – plenty of them, it appears, as this is far from the only Psalm to read like this. And, like us, David’s urgent plea arose from two types of challenge he was facing.

The first is trouble with other people: ‘How long will you people turn my glory into shame?’ (v2) This could be interpreted as people who mocked his faith, or as people who professed similar beliefs but didn’t live as they should. Either (or both) of those sound familiar? However, David goes beyond pleading to remind himself of something precious: ‘Know that the Lord has set apart his faithful servant for himself.’ (v3) Faced with difficulty, David returns to something unchanging and unchangeable – his identity before God. When others let him down, the Lord doesn’t, because he has chosen him to be his friend.

The second challenge is scarce resources. And, if you’re like me, it’s a frequent prayer of most of us for God to provide in some way for our needs. Here, David puts it like this: ‘Many, Lord, are asking, “Who will bring us prosperity?”’ (v6) And once again, David returns to his identity, specifically the original blessing given by the Lord to his people, through Aaron: ‘Let the light of your face shine upon us.’ (see Numbers 6:25)

It’s a great encouragement to remember that God is comfortable with us asking for help: for the resources we need to live, in whatever form that takes. It’s not for nothing that Jesus himself puts this line right at the heart of the prayer he gave us: ‘Give us today our daily bread.’ God provides for his children – then, as now.

Ultimately, the answer David craves at the start is found at the very end of the Psalm: ‘you alone, Lord, make me dwell in safety.’ In other words, our life is bound up with God, our refuge and provider. We may not have the exact answer yet, but what we do know is that the Lord will provide, in his own good time. That is what gave David rest (and this Psalm is a great one to pray at night – indeed this final verse is quoted at the end of Night Prayer in the Anglican tradition) – may it grant us rest, and peace, today.

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### **Day 5 – Psalm 5 ‘The Morning’**

Psalms 3 and 4 are psalms of the night – see 3:5, 4:4 and 4:8. Whoever collated these psalms knew what they were doing, because Psalm 5 is a psalm of the morning: (v3) ‘In the morning, Lord, you hear my voice; in the morning I lay my requests before you and wait expectantly.’

I’m not much of a morning person; ‘more of an owl than a lark’, as my mum used to say. So it’s always been more of a challenge for me to soak the start of my day in prayer than the end. That said, for all that it’s a struggle, I became convinced many years ago that, however much I had to act against my body clock, there was great value in taking David’s advice: ‘In the morning, Lord, you hear my voice; in the morning I lay my requests before you and wait expectantly.’

And what we see in this Psalm is that David focuses on three things, which he prays in a particular order....

He begins with declaring God’s character – both his holiness (vv5-6) and his love (v7). This makes perfect sense – reminding ourselves to whom we are praying, and the greatness of the One we worship, can only stir us to prayer and praise. If verses 5 and 6 are more unsettling to read, we only have to look at the many injustices and atrocities in this world to take comfort in the fact that the Lord of this Psalm feels more strongly about them than we do; and there will, one day, be a just reckoning for them.

Next what is striking is what he *doesn’t* pray for. He doesn’t ask for troubles to go; rather he prays that the Lord would lead him on a straight path through them: (v8) ‘Lead me Lord, in your righteousness... make your way straight before me.’ Whatever we face today, let’s pray that the Lord makes our path both straight *and* plain.

Finally, he looks outwards, and prays joy, blessing and protection for others: (v11) ‘Let all who take refuge in you be glad; let them ever sing for joy. Spread your protection over them...; (v12) ‘Surround them with your favour as with a shield.’ Who could you pray these blessings for today?

What a fabulous psalm; and what a great structure for prayer, too! Why not use this today as a template – customise it as you go along. And, if that blesses you, why not try the rhythm of Psalm 3/4 tonight and Psalm 5 again tomorrow? Psalm 6 can wait a day!

May all of us, who love the Lord’s name, rejoice in him (v11) – today, and in this season. Amen.

## ***The Psalms, day-by-day (written 2023)***

### **Day 6 – Psalm 6 ‘The Anguish’**

I wonder how comfortable you are with the expression of extreme emotions? Generally, we Brits tend not to be too keen on extremes. If the temperature falls below 12 degrees centigrade, it's too cold; if it's above 18, it's too hot! Similarly, we have long prized the 'stiff upper lip' – a sense of stoicism in the face of life's challenges. Great successes or occasions of joy are met with handshakes; a social commentator once observed wryly: 'The English way of expressing strong emotion is to stare silently into the fire.'

I certainly recognise myself in this – perhaps you do, too. So, we can sometimes find ourselves uneasy with the sort of language David uses in this Psalm: 'my bones are in agony' (v2); 'my soul is in deep anguish' (v3); 'I am worn out from my groaning. All night long I flood my bed with weeping and drench my couch with tears. My eyes grow weak with sorrow....' (vv6-7)

The cause of this emotional crisis is clearly the opposition he faces in his day-to-day life. As far as we know, this is not a specific moment of crisis (like Psalm 3), nor is he ill – he simply has lots of people who wish to do him harm, perhaps even to take his life: 'Who praises you from his grave?' (v5) And this persistent sense of the pervasive presence of his enemies is profoundly affecting his wellbeing.

For all that we might not feel as troubled as David, we can take much from this psalm: first, for those of us who really are in difficulty, David gives us language to vocalise our plight. Our enemies may or may not be people – they may be circumstances or inner demons – but they still cause us harm. This psalm reminds us that we are not alone: we walk a path that others walk, too – not just before us, but with us.

Second, the fact that David can talk like this before the Lord reminds us that we really do worship an approachable God: One to whom we can pour out our troubles, and whom we can address as we would a loving parent. A God who knows and understands, a God who cares, a God who hears our cry for mercy and accepts our prayer (v9).

For all that we might temper David's triumphalism at the end of this psalm through the more gracious lens of the New Testament and the humility of Christ, the fact is that the New Testament also promises us a final victory over our own mortal enemies of evil, sickness and death. The unfailing love of the Lord (v4) is just as true *now*, as it was then. Today, pray this psalm either for yourself, or for others who for whom these words are very real. And may the unfailing love of the Lord give us grace to prevail in all that the day will bring.

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### **Day 7 – Psalm 7 ‘The Vindication’**

We love a good TV crime drama in our family. At its heart is a quest for justice – alongside the satisfaction of trying to solve a good puzzle, and a reminder of the value of a human life i.e. that someone’s untimely death is worth pursuing justice for. But it is noticeable in recent years how often the perpetrator in such dramas meets a violent end themselves. It’s arguable whether justice is truly served in this instance (at least this side of the grave) – but it calls to mind the words of Jesus when confronted by the mob in the Garden of Gethsemane: ‘All who draw the sword will die by the sword.’ (Matthew 26:52)

Violence begets violence – as the old adage goes – and in today’s Psalm David appears to be the subject of a vicious vendetta, possibly orchestrated by Cush, who was a Benjaminite – see the notes in the intro to the Psalm. His first response is to question himself: (v3) ‘O Lord my God, if I have done this and there is guilt on my hands....’ This is a helpful first step – we should always examine ourselves first, before pointing the finger at others – again, as Jesus himself teaches (Matt 7:3-5).

Then, having satisfied himself that his own actions were right, his prayer asks God to intervene on his behalf: (vv8-9) ‘Let the Lord judge the peoples. Vindicate me, Lord, according to my righteousness... Bring to an end the violence of the wicked.’ This prayer echoes a repeated theme of the Psalms – that when faced with trouble, we ask *God* to act, we don’t take the law into our own hands. The Lord is the one who vindicates us – and in praying this prayer, we thereby surrender our right to act as agents of our own vengeance.

Many of us would probably say that we only face this kind of extreme situation quite rarely: but, even if our troubles are less acute, the principle is sound. We give our troubles to God and ask him to act on our behalf. Where we are unjustly persecuted or opposed, we trust that the Lord will protect us and that wickedness will be its own reward – as David observes: ‘Whoever is pregnant with evil conceives trouble and gives birth to disillusionment... The trouble they cause recoils on them; their violence comes down on their own heads.’ (v14, v16)

I don’t know if this psalm addresses questions of global injustice or national violence – that’s a topic for another day. But in our personal relationships, this Psalm invites us to examine ourselves, to let the Lord be the One who vindicates us, and to leave our enemies in God’s hands. As we do that, so may our gracious Lord give us all grace to ‘give thanks to the Lord because of his righteousness [and] sing the praises of the name of the Lord Most High.’ Amen.

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### Day 8 – Psalm 8 ‘The Majesty’

In January I got a new computer. I say ‘new’ – new to me. ‘Pre-loved’ I believe is the term nowadays ...although I doubt anyone loves a desktop PC in the way they might love some other object. ‘Pre-tolerated’ is probably more appropriate. Anyway, this whizzy machine greets me every time I turn it on with a beautiful picture of somewhere in the world: a mighty mountain, a dreamy lake, a sunlit savannah. It’s not something my computer has ever done for me before – thank you, Mr Gates – but it’s a lovely moment before the reality of having to graft away in front of a screen for a few hours kicks in.

‘Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!’ So begins today’s Psalm – one of the most famous and best-loved of all psalms. And, as I read it today and reflected on what to write, it struck me immediately that this should be my response every time I turn on my computer and see one of those extraordinary images of the glory of Creation. Creation sings the glory of the Lord – and causes us to cry out in praise, too. Note to self!

I find it fascinating what David goes on to say next. The first bit is obvious: (v1b) ‘You have set your glory in the heavens.’ Even in our ‘scientific’ world, looking up at the enormity of the sky causes us to gasp – and, 3,000 years after this was written, the richest human beings on our planet today still want to spend a vast amount of their personal wealth trying to explore a tiny fragment of it.

But if the ‘heavens’ are clearly a hymn to the Lord’s glory, David also finds majesty ‘through the praise of children and infants’ (v2). It is as if, David is saying, God’s glory is so great that we know it intuitively from our earliest years. This is because we have a special place in God’s Creation: below the angels, yes (v5a); but no less crowned with glory and honour (v5b) because the Lord has appointed human beings to be ‘rulers over the works of your hands; you put everything under their feet.’ (v6)

This is not an excuse for us to abuse or dominate our world: quite the opposite, in fact – we are to tend and look after it, just as the Lord does. We have a responsibility to all parts of Creation (vv7-8), and, since the Lord’s majesty is revealed in and through his Creation, whatever damage we do to our world potentially impugns the majesty of the Lord’s name. There’s a thought... For followers of Christ, our care for the planet is not ultimately a political position or a personal passion, but a divine delegation. God has appointed us to look after the world as well as he would.

How we do that is inevitably far too big a question for a short reflection; however, it has to start with us retaining a sense of joy and awe at the sheer beauty of creation, and the majesty of the One it points to. As it was for the psalmist, may that be our beginning, and our end: ‘Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!’



**Day 9 – Psalm 9 ‘The Judgment’**

The modern church urgently needs to recover a healthy doctrine of judgment. Generally, it’s a word we avoid – and I think we lose a huge amount by doing so. Perhaps too often the word has been used only in negative ways, as something to create fear or as a stick to beat people with. And the ‘negative’ aspect of judgment is half right – but only half right! Which is the problem....

Judgment is – or should be – a completely neutral term. It defines God’s righteous decision-making in relation to the world, and his capacity to put those decisions into action. It is a glorious truth, because it reminds us that (a) God really is in control, and (b) that all things will be put right – sometimes in this life, and definitely in the world to come. This is something to celebrate: a doctrine of comfort and joy for God’s people! Not to be abused, or only applied to other people (which is very much a human trait) – but a foundation stone, if you like, that puts the chaos and troubles of our world into context, and promises hope to all who call on the name of the Lord.

As David declares in today’s psalm that, ‘The Lord... has established his throne for judgment’ (v7), he reminds us that judgment cuts both ways. On the one hand, the wicked get their just desserts (vv3-6, vv15-17) – though as we observed a few days ago, we might temper David’s approach to his enemies through the lens of the New Testament.

On the other hand, and positively, David affirms the Lord’s judgment in favour of two groups of people: first, those who are oppressed (v9), afflicted (v12) or needy (v18). The Lord is refuge for all who are vulnerable. Many such people may not get justice in this life – but, the psalm affirms, God has not forgotten them, and ‘the hope of the afflicted will never perish’ (v18).

Second, the Lord judges in favour of his people: (v10) ‘Those who know your name trust in you, for you, Lord, have never forsaken those who seek you.’ This is good news! God has not forgotten us, either. He has not forgotten *you*.

I find it hard to know how to pray for the big conflicts of the world. But today’s psalm helps me to find a good perspective: the Lord knows the hearts, not just of individuals, but of nations, and he will ultimately be their judge. Take a few moments today to commend all these situations into the Lord’s hands – and, as we do that, let’s also pray for the vulnerable and followers of Christ caught up in them: for the Lord has never forsaken those who seek him.

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### Day 10 – Psalm 10 ‘The Wicked’

A few years ago, my wife and I heard some frantic car horns blaring on the road just outside our house. Thinking that maybe some accident had occurred, we hurried out to see what was going on. What we discovered was a stand-off. The road narrows by the entrance to our drive and lots of nursery families had also parked along the kerb, dropping their kids off. As a result, it wasn't wide enough for two cars to pass, and someone was going to have to reverse a little so that the other could pass.... but neither was prepared to do so. Fists were waved from car windows, and at one point one of the drivers got out and started advancing menacingly towards the other. Thankfully it didn't get to physical confrontation, but it was a good 3 or 4 minutes before one backed down, by which time a long queue had developed behind each car, which only added to the time it took to clear the jam.

It's a small incident (and utterly self-defeating!), but it reminds us of how – even in a relatively affluent, quiet neighbourhood – some of our less pleasant human traits hover only just beneath the surface. For all that we might recoil in horror at what happens in some places around the world, I wonder how quickly our veneer of civilisation would survive the sort of challenges much of the world faces on a daily basis?

Today's psalm is not an easy read – but it is a candid reminder of the traits that lead to human wickedness: predatory exploitation of the vulnerable for our own benefit (v2, vv8-10); praising and joining in with evil rather than confronting it (v3); an arrogant presumption of being untouchable (v6); and, ultimately, a determination to reject God (vv4-5, v11).

Although this was written 3,000 years ago, if we look around at our world, how much has changed? The bible is refreshingly honest about human nature, and to my mind remains by far the best commentary on the human heart that there has ever been, and ever will be: it never pulls any punches about the human inclination towards selfishness. If what this psalm describes represents the extreme end of the spectrum, we also recognise not everything in our own heart can be praised. There but for the grace of God....

Today, take a moment to confess anything you know you need to lay out before the Lord. It's good to clear the decks regularly. But also, take heart: 'You, God, see the trouble of the afflicted; you consider their grief and take it in hand.' The Lord is still God – and we love and serve this great God today, as every day.

## ***The Psalms, day-by-day (written 2023)***

### **Day 11 – Psalm 11 ‘The Upright’**

Fight or flight. This is the instinctive response of creatures to danger – including human beings. When faced with a threat, we either attack or run away. Fight or flight.

It’s not just in physical confrontations, either. The same is true of other challenges: a difficult relationship, a cashflow problem. We adopt this basic ‘fight or flight’ approach in these situations, too. If you take a moment to think about your response, you’ll discover an underlying fight or flight tendency – and probably a preference for one over the other in most types of situation.

David faced a similar dilemma in today’s psalm. He was in danger, and his advisors were recommending flight: ‘Flee like a bird to the mountain. For look, the wicked bend their bows; they set their arrows against the strings.’ (vv1-2) David, as we know, is quite comfortable with fighting – but in this instance the wise option being counselled was flight.

David, though, is having none of it: ‘How can you say to me...’ (v1) However, the alternative is not to fight – there is a third option: not fight or flight, but upright (v2,v7). David trusts in the Lord to act. In this case, both as a refuge (v1) and as a judge (vv4-6) – protecting *and* intervening.

There is wisdom in this for us, too. It’s not that fight or flight or always wrong – but for followers of the Lord, there is another option: we trust God to intervene on our behalf. This is not a passive kind of waiting, but an active placing of trust. It is an exercise of faith, especially because we don’t necessarily know how or when the Lord will intervene. Even for the ‘upright of heart’, it is scary to face arrows being shot from the shadows (v2).

But, for David, confidence in the Lord is not misplaced, and it allows him to stand his ground. He rests on the truth of God’s character: (v7) ‘the Lord is righteous, he loves justice.’ And even if the worst should happen, he knows that his relationship with the Lord is secure: ‘the upright will see his face.’ (Note: this could mean vindication in this life – but we also have the joy of knowing that it is a certainty in the next.)

So, today, whatever life brings, let us – like David – take refuge in the Lord. And may that raise our faith to stand, upright, on the rock of God’s character. Amen.

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### Day 12 – Psalm 12 ‘The Crucible’

At King Charles’ Coronation in May (2023), at one of the key moments in the service – The Oaths – the new king was given a bible, with the words: ‘Receive this book, the most valuable thing that this world affords. Here is Wisdom; this is the royal Law; these are the lively oracles of God.’ (and what a great phrase that last one is!) He was then be invited to place his hand on this bible, in order to make the various oaths of service to the country and to God.

It’s a powerful reminder of the incredible value of God’s Word. Truth is a precious commodity – indeed a priceless one, fundamental to our existence and flourishing as human beings – and the bible identifies itself as the ultimate source of it. All truth comes from God, and the Lord speaks this truth primarily via his Word. It is, indeed, the most precious thing this world affords.

David similarly affirms this in today’s psalm: (v6) ‘The words of the Lord are flawless, like silver purified in a crucible, like gold refined seven times.’ Seven is the biblical number for perfection, and gold – then, as now – was the most valuable metal: so this is a poetic way of saying that Scripture is the absolute source of truth, the place we can always go to find it.

This mattered, because, as David shares in the early part of the psalm, truth was being contested. Lies were becoming the norm, not just among his opponents, but in his culture more generally: (vv1-2) ‘No-one is faithful any more... Everyone lies to their neighbour.’ It’s sobering to realise that nothing much changes in human society. For all our technical advancements and supposed cultural evolution, we still face the same issues with lying, deceit and faithfulness 3,000 years later.

It is interesting to note that David associates this capacity to lie both with arrogance (v4) and with lack of compassion for the poor (v5) – a helpful insight that the way we use our lips is never ‘just lying’, it points towards a deeper brokenness in a person’s character. That’s why the bible consistently affirms the importance of using our mouths, and our words, for good.

Today, let’s re-commit ourselves to being people of truth – which is as much to say, people after the Lord’s own heart. And let’s also rejoice that we have access to the source of truth, the most precious thing this world affords. It is the crucible of wisdom – and may that precious, life-giving wisdom empower our lives today.

## ***The Psalms, day-by-day (written 2023)***

### **Day 13 – Psalm 13 ‘The Overcomer’**

Every year our city of Milton Keynes hosts a marathon. One of my good friends was running in it this year, his first marathon at the age of 56. Thankfully he made it, and he popped in afterwards for a cup of tea – I had offered a celebratory protein shake, but he went for tea (good decision).

He admitted it had been really hard. He’d never run further than a half-marathon, and was really feeling it after 15 miles. He was also raising funds for a church repair project, which only added to the pressure – thinking of all that sponsorship money which might be lost if he quit. But he got there, and whilst he expects to be hobbling for the rest of the week – and will never run another one! – he can enjoy the satisfaction of having battled with his body, and overcome.

‘How long?’ So today’s Psalm begins – a cry every marathon runner knows well! It’s also been a recurring theme already in the psalms, appearing in Psalms 4, 6 and now for a third time in Psalm 13. It’s a cry of the heart, and one that anyone who prays for anything that really matters knows well.

David testifies to all the emotions that I’m sure many of us have experienced, too when troubles are ongoing: mental conflict (‘wrestling with my thoughts’ vs), sorrow (v2), a feeling of failure (v2), and even wondering if life is really worth it after all (v3).

What we don’t find out in this Psalm is whether David gets the answer to his prayer. *But* he does get something else, perhaps even more precious: he is reminded of the Lord’s unfailing love, and rejoices in his salvation (v5). There is more at play than his current circumstances. Despite everything, David counts his blessings, because he knows that the Lord has been good to him (v6).

It’s not a magic cure, but this kind of attitude does set everything in perspective. Life is hard, and although specific answers to particular challenges are always welcome, what we really need is the assurance of something deeper: of the abiding presence of God, of his consistent goodness, of the fact that we are loved and saved, despite our flaws, our failings and our foibles.

This is what enables David to overcome, day by day. It is the recipe for us, too. So, today, keep offering your heartfelt prayers to God, don’t be afraid to cry ‘How long, Lord?’ – but also take a few moments to anchor yourself in the eternal consistency of God’s character: his unfailing love, goodness and salvation. Those who do always overcome.

## *The Psalms, day-by-day (written 2023)*

### Day 14 – Psalm 14 ‘The Fool’

The Monday after King Charles’ coronation (May 2023) saw The Big Help Out. King Charles asked that people celebrate his coronation, not just by enjoying parties (on Sunday, of which 67,000 were planned – British weather permitting!), but also by doing some good. So, up and down the country, tens of thousands of people engaged in simple activities to make a difference. Litter-picking, renovation projects, gardening in public spaces, the list goes on....

So, it's something of shock to read the opening verses of today’s psalm: ‘there is no-one who does good... there is no-one who does good, not even one.’ (v1,v3) What are we to make of it – surely, with events like The Big Help Out, we have thousands of examples to the contrary?

Let’s start by remembering that hyperbole (we would say exaggeration) is a useful tool in literature – it’s designed to make a point. David is challenging the general spiritual apathy of society. The word ‘fool’ here is less aimed at a lack of wisdom than a lack of morality. Since God is the source of everything – including both wisdom and holiness – to live apart from God is foolishness, because it cuts us off from the truth which powers a righteous and loving lifestyle.

The root problem here is a lack of regard towards God, which in turn leads to the sort of degeneracy David laments in the first half of the psalm. This is a challenging thought, since it locates human goodness in something more than just good deeds – it lies more in the spirit, the inner life which motivates our deeds. Our goodness has to be enabled, inspired, empowered by *something* – or perhaps we should say *Someone*. This is a helpful perspective on days like today.

We can, of course, celebrate all good works aimed at blessing and serving others – following the pattern of the Lord, who came not to be served but to serve. However, real community transformation has to lie in something deeper. Hearts need to change – if outward goodness is only masking inner corruption (v1,v3) then little is ultimately achieved. St Paul in fact quotes the first half of this Psalm in Romans 3:10-12 as a textbook illustration of the corruption of the human heart, which leaves all of humanity in need of a Saviour.

Thankfully, the psalm also reminds us that ‘God is present in the company of the righteous.’ (v5) And this thought – of the two competing forces of good and evil, within both society and each human heart – prompts David to conclude by crying out: (v7) ‘O that that salvation...would come!’ If we turn back to Romans 3, we see that St Paul gets to that same point too – only now, he knows where that salvation comes from, he knows how to heal the human heart. And may Paul’s glorious conclusion be our hope and inspiration, today and always: (3:21,24) ‘But now... the righteousness of God has been made known... all are justified freely by his grace, through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.’ Hallelujah!

## ***The Psalms, day-by-day (written 2023)***

### **Day 15 – Psalm 15 ‘The Blameless’**

As a family we used to love the game Jenga. You may be familiar with it: a stack of wooden blocks is created and, little by little, blocks are removed from the stack and placed on the top. The stack gets higher and higher, and also more and more fragile. Eventually the slightest tremor, the tiniest shake of the hand causes the stack to fall, and that person is the loser.

Sometimes life can feel like a game of Jenga. What feels like the solid stack of our existence slowly gets undermined. Things go wrong unexpectedly, relationships struggle, we face illness, uncertainty or some kind of hardship – each challenge is like a block that gets removed, and our ‘stack’ gets more and more fragile. Soon we fear that the slightest shake will cause it all to collapse.

In times like this, how do we stand firm? How can we ensure that we are not ‘shaken’? Today’s psalm addresses this very question. It proceeds from the premise that the best place on which to base the ‘stack’ of our lives is God’s holy hill (v1) – something strong, immovable... so the question then becomes: ‘Lord... who may dwell on your holy hill?’ (v1)

The answer lies in the way we live – and let’s note that this is not a recipe for activism or a self-help manual. This is more about the direction of our lives, the way we set our priorities. The person who can stand firm, who will not be shaken, will be righteous with both their words *and* their actions. So, they speak the truth (v2), do not slander or cast a slur on others (v3); they also do no wrong to their neighbour (v3), lend generously without advantage to themselves (v5) and refuse bribes (v5).

The phrase that I found most striking when preparing today’s inspiration was this: (v4) ‘who keeps an oath even when it hurts’. This is where words and deeds come together – can we fulfil with our actions what we’ve promised with our lips, even when it’s costly? I found myself thinking about the weighty oaths at the recent coronation of King Charles – and also, on a smaller scale, about the little promises we all make on a daily or weekly basis. Am I someone who can be trusted to do what I promise?

It’s a challenge; but also an opportunity, because it carries a great reward – this is the punchline of the psalm: ‘whoever does these things will never be shaken.’ If you’re anything like me, I want the kind of life that can weather the storms, that can cope with blocks being removed from my stack and not be shaken. Here’s the key: if we live with integrity, we find the Lord’s blessing. We get to place our stack on the immovable mountain of the Lord.

May the Lord grant us all grace to live like that today – and, whatever we face at present, to trust that, held fast in the Lord’s hands, we will not be shaken.

## ***The Psalms, day-by-day (written 2023)***

### **Day 16 – Psalm 16 ‘The Portion’**

‘Just a small portion for me.’ These are words I utter quite often at our family meals; I do love food, but I don’t have a particularly big appetite, so if there’s a pudding available, my desire to enjoy it is tempered by my modest appetite – so I’ll compromise with these words: ‘Just a small portion, please.’

The point is, it doesn’t matter what size the portion is: what you really want is *enough*. That might be a large portion, a medium-sized one, or a small one: if it’s enough, then it’s just right.

And that helps to explain this lovely, but slightly odd, phrase in today’s psalm, written by King David: (v5) ‘Lord, you alone are my portion and my cup.’ To our ears, we might find ourselves wondering: ‘well, we don’t know if that’s a good thing, because we don’t know if it’s large portion or a small one – what if David only gets a small slice of the cake?! More to the point, what if we only get a small portion from God, too?’

The point isn’t the size of the portion: the point is that it’s enough. God’s grace is always sufficient, and whatever he gives us is what we need. For David, God’s portion to him offered security: ‘in you I take refuge... you make my lot secure... I shall not be shaken’ (v1, v5, v8). It offered hope: ‘surely I have a delightful inheritance’ (v6). It offered wisdom: ‘I will praise the Lord, who counsels me; even at night my heart instructs me’ (v7).

This psalm is often read at a burial, because it is one of the first to acknowledge the reality of eternal life. Early Jewish tradition was agnostic about the idea as to whether there was life after death, or whether God’s blessings are only for this life. One of David’s most precious pieces of counsel from the Lord – right here in this psalm – is that God’s portion reaches beyond the grave, offering us eternal life: or, as he puts it, ‘eternal pleasures at your right hand’ (v11). Peter quoted Psalm 16’s promise of resurrection in his Pentecost sermon (Acts 2:25-28) – but it’s not only Jesus who receives the glorious promises at the end of this psalm; thanks to Jesus, it’s us, too.

Strength for today, and bright hope for tomorrow – as the great old hymn puts it – *this* is the Lord’s portion to David. This is also the Lord’s portion to us. The size doesn’t matter: what matters is that it is enough. God’s portion control is always just right. Great is his faithfulness!



## *The Psalms, day-by-day (written 2023)*

### Day 17 – Psalm 17 ‘The Apple’

‘Jesus loves you.... but I’m his favourite.’

I remember a Christian leader sharing in a talk that he would love to wear a T-shirt like that, with ‘Jesus loves you’ on the front, and ‘but I’m his favourite’ on the back! Whatever you think of that, from either a sartorial or an evangelistic point of view, the point he was making was quite profound. He was preaching on a passage from the gospel of John, which refers to ‘the disciple whom Jesus loved’. Many people think this is John himself – but you can also read it as a way of us (or any reader) entering the story personally. *You* are the disciple Jesus loves. I am the disciple Jesus loves.

We are familiar with the idea that God loves us – but not all of us are comfortable with the idea that God actually *likes* us. We can imagine God’s love as the sort of stoic act of will often seen in previous generations: he loves us because he’s God, he has to – but like? Why would God like me?

This psalm contains many similar themes that we encounter in lots of David’s psalms. Troubles, enemies, pleas for vindication and judgement.... but there is one extraordinary verse in the middle: in fact the exact middle, verse 8 of 15 (a perfect 7 before and 7 after): ‘Keep me as the apple of your eye; hide me in the shadow of your wings.’

The ‘apple of your eye’ appears as a phrase five times in the Old Testament: three times it refers to God’s view of the nation of Israel (i.e. his people as a whole), and once to how we should view God’s law. Only here do we find it applied to one individual. David is not praying as a ‘nation’ but as a person. Keep me, Lord, he prays, as the apple of your eye. (And note: David knows that he already is – he prays ‘keep me’, not ‘make me’.)

We may not always see eye to eye with the more vengeful bits of David’s psalms. But his relationship with the Lord has something amazing to teach us in this respect: his childlike confidence in God’s love – and that similarly childlike sense that his divine parent not only loves him conditionally, he actually *likes* him. God thinks he’s amazing, and when he’s in trouble, he comes back to that. He knows that, whatever is going on, God is not punishing him (apart from Psalm 51, but that’s for another time). It’s just life – and his divine parent, who sees him personally as the apple of his eye, will see him through.

I want that kind of relationship with the Lord. I want that assurance of knowing that I am the apple of God’s eye. Perhaps you do, too. So, today, why not spend a few moments with this verse? Pray for grace to believe that God doesn’t just love you, he likes you as well. And may you live from that place of unfailing love today, hidden in the shadow of his wings.

## *The Psalms, day-by-day (written 2023)*

### Day 18 – Psalm 18 ‘The Deliverer’

‘In 1972, a crack commando unit was sent to prison by a military court for a crime they didn't commit. These men promptly escaped from a maximum security stockade to the Los Angeles underground. Today, still wanted by the government they survive as soldiers of fortune. If you have a problem, if no one else can help, and if you can find them – maybe you can hire...’ For those of us of a certain generation, we'll be able to finish that last sentence immediately: maybe you can hire... The A-Team.

Featuring great car chases, impossibly slack incarceration and terrible shooting by the baddies, this iconic series was a classic ‘deliverance’ show. People got into real trouble, they contacted the A-team for help, and they would be delivered from their troubles. It's the kind of story our culture tells itself in countless ways, through our TV and our books. From Spiderman to Ghostbusters, The Incredibles to Octonauts, stories of rescue are told (and re-told) across every generation.

It's nothing new, of course – humanity has sung songs of deliverance for thousands of years. And where we have superheroes now, in generations past people had.... God. (I'm not sure our culture nowadays represents progress!) Today's psalm is a long one, perhaps because its introduction describes how David composed this after he had defeated all his enemies and also King Saul. In other words, this is the great release after years of trouble. So, a big deliverance needs a big song.

There's far too much in it for one reflection, but the key is really the first two verses. The Lord is described as both an immovable object (my rock, my fortress) and an irresistible force (my strength, my deliverer). Much of the rest of the psalm focuses on the latter: on God's majestic presence and sovereign activity, rescuing David and routing the enemy.

I must confess I can find these psalms a bit OTT – but at the same time, I have to admit that I find it very easy to try and solve my problems via every human method, apart from the Lord. I try to rely on my experience, my wisdom, my job security or my insurance policy – and there's nothing wrong with that, as far as it goes. God gives us practical strategies, just as he did David. However, sometimes it's good to be reminded that we're not on our own. We have a divine deliverer, who ‘shields all who take refuge in him’ (v30).

We may not have enemies who need routing (I hope not, anyway): but there will be times when our wisdom, experience and insurance policy is not enough. If that's you, let this psalm be an encouragement to call upon the Lord, who is worthy of praise (v3). And may this gracious God be our rock, our fortress and our deliverer today.

## ***The Psalms, day-by-day (written 2023)***

### **Day 19 – Psalm 19 ‘The Voice’**

No, not Tom Jones this time! As great a singer as he is.... Here’s a quote from St. Augustine instead:

‘Some people, in order to discover God, read books. But there is a great book: the very appearance of created things. Look above you! Look below you! Read it. God, whom you want to discover, never wrote that book with ink. Instead, He set before your eyes the things that He had made. Can you ask for a louder voice than that?’

Today’s marvellous Psalm – one of many people’s favourites – is all about the voice of God; and it reminds us that God really has two voices (or, you might say, one voice which speaks in two different ways). The first is the obvious one: his Word. Verses 7-11 are a beautiful exposition of the power of God’s Word, and our delight in them. As the Psalmist says: (v10) ‘they are more precious than gold.... they are sweeter than honey.’ In essence, it’s why I write these inspirations day-by-day: because this psalm is true, and my desire is to keep treasuring the voice of God, and the sweetness of its insight.

But there is a second voice, which forms the first half of the psalm. It is the voice of creation. Take, for example, the awesome experience of looking up into the vast sky, to see the clouds or the stars: (vv3-4) ‘they have no speech, they use no words; no sound is heard from them. Yet their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world.’

We are in a season (this reflection was written in the summer) when we can appreciate the full ‘voice’ of creation. Indeed, the culture around us also celebrates it: in the week that I wrote this, this included the RHS Chelsea Flower Show, Great Big Green Week, and even the Churches Count on Nature, capturing the diversity in our ancient churchyards.

Today, let’s set aside a few moments to contemplate and celebrate both ‘voices’ of the Lord: his Word, and also his other voice: the Voice of creation. And may the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer. Amen.

## ***The Psalms, day-by-day (written 2023)***

### **Day 20 – Psalm 20 ‘The Anointed’**

Let’s rewind one more time to King Charles’ coronation: to a moment so familiar to us, a tradition re-enacted many times, a phrase which forms the first line of the National Anthem – in short, that moment when the assembled congregation shouted, ‘God save the King!’

It may surprise you to know that this phrase was not invented in modern, pre-modern or even mediaeval times (which perhaps is what many of us would have guessed, with the advent of the idea of the divine right of kings), but goes back 3,000 years, right to this very Psalm in fact. The last verse could be translated (and is in the 1984 NIV): ‘God save the King!’

The phrase was used at King Solomon’s coronation (1 Kings 1:39), so we know it had public currency in Old Testament Israel; but this is a psalm of his predecessor, King David, so Psalm 20 most likely represents its first use anywhere – at least, its first use invoking the Lord’s name, the God that we worship.

This is a lovely psalm of blessing, and some of us may have used it in prayer for ourselves, or others: the first five verses invoke some wonderful outcomes, things which many of us long for ourselves. We do need to be slightly careful, though: the context of this psalm is asking God to bless the king, his anointed (v6). Generally, in this type of psalm its first point of reference is Messianic – or, in our language, it points to Jesus. These declarations of victory and blessing prophetically point to the ultimate Anointed One, the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus is the true victorious king (v9), who manifested the power of God’s right hand (v6) and whose divinely-inspired plans succeeded (v4).

That said, we *can* pray these blessings too – since we are in Christ, we can inherit these same blessings, so long as they are received in and through Christ. In Jesus’ name, God answers us (v1) and sends us help (v2). It was Jesus’ perfect offering (v3) that opened the way for God to graciously grant us our heart’s rightly-directed desires (v4).

So we can rejoice in praying these blessings – as long as we know through whom these blessings come. Jesus is victorious: and may the Lord give us grace to keep trusting in his victory.

## *The Psalms, day-by-day (written 2023)*

### Day 21 – Psalm 21 ‘The King’

Today’s psalm continues yesterday’s theme: the victory of the king. And at first sight, we can reflect on David’s own reign – especially the first half – and see parallels with his experience. As David lived as ‘a man after God’s own heart’, so Israel’s enemies were defeated (2 Sam 5), the ark was restored to Jerusalem, amidst great celebration (2 Sam 6), and God promised that his son would build a temple, fit for the Lord’s glory (2 Sam 7). ‘How great is his joy in the victories you give!’ indeed.

As we also know, things unravelled as David got older. His adultery with Bathsheba and subsequent orchestration of her husband’s murder brought a judgment upon him, and whilst his repentance was genuine, and his kingship continued, David’s reign never really recovered. His son Absalom rebels against him, David flees and his throne was only restored with the terrible pain of knowing that his military commander (and ruthless enforcer) Joab had killed Absalom to crush the rebellion. So, David regained the throne at the cost of his son’s life, thereafter ceding power to the quasi-military rule of his enforcer.

So, this psalm is a true record of David’s reign, up to a point: but only up to a point. Even David, one of the greatest kings of them all, had his flaws. He may have enjoyed rich blessings and a crown of gold (v3), but his life was mortal, not immortal (v4) and his glory, majesty and splendour were transient (v5). He undoubtedly experienced the joy of God’s presence (v6), as his many psalms demonstrate, and he had displayed an unusual capacity to trust in the Lord (v7: a great example is 1 Samuel 30, especially vv6-8), but his blessings were not unending, and he was repeatedly shaken in the last years of his life.

So, once again, we find ourselves looking beyond David to a greater King, the King of kings – the one who would truly encompass all of these qualities and receive all of these blessings. The King who would be granted ‘length of days, for ever and ever’ (v4) – as described in the amazing prophetic vision of Isaiah 53: ‘He will see his offspring and prolong his days... After he has suffered, he will see the light of life and be satisfied... my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities.’

This last phrase is, of course, the sting in the tail – and, just as Isaiah 53 holds both suffering and glory together, so it points us from Psalm 21 towards Psalm 22, which otherwise appears to make a bewildering contrast with the joy and triumph of Psalm 21. I don’t know if King David planned it like that, or later editors of scripture; but the Lord knew what he was doing. As we give thanks today that we love and serve the true victorious King, may we never lose the wonder, the wonder of the cross – the path of suffering that led our Lord to glory.

## *The Psalms, day-by-day (written 2023)*

### Day 22 – Psalm 22 ‘The Forsaken’

On a hill outside Jerusalem c.30AD, an innocent man, dying the death of a convicted criminal, gasps in agony: ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’

Amid all the drama of the Easter story, this moment is perhaps the most traumatic and striking of all. A dying Jesus experiences the agony of being separated from his Father for the first and only time in eternity. It is impossible to imagine what this must have felt like, even as the necessary price Jesus paid to win our salvation. By God’s grace, it was only temporary, and we know the end of the story: the empty tomb, the resurrection life, the victory over sin, Satan and death itself. But let’s just pause briefly to stay in that moment....

As we ‘behold the man upon a cross’ (to quote the words of the hymn), let’s also reflect that Jesus is not just uttering a cry of despair: he is also – and quite deliberately – quoting the beginning of Psalm 22. For it is Psalm 22, along with Isaiah 53, which, more than any other piece of scripture, foretells the events of the crucifixion a thousand years after these words were written. Look at the specific details fulfilled at Calvary centuries later: (v7) ‘they hurl insults, shaking their heads’ (Mark 15:29); (v15) ‘my mouth is dried up’ (Mark 15:36); (v16) ‘they pierce my hands and feet’ (Mark 15:25); (v18) ‘they divide my clothes among them, and cast lots for my garment’ (Luke 23:34).

Yet, this is not just a psalm of desolation – it is also a psalm of consolation. The psalmist has an internal dialogue going on throughout the psalm: the great cry of verses 1-2 is counteracted by verses 3-5: ‘you are the one Israel praises.... in you they trusted and were not put to shame.’ The poisonous mocking of verses 6-8 is neutralised by the truth of verses 9-10: ‘From birth I was cast on you; from my mother’s womb you have been my God.’ The agonies of verses 12-21 are answered by the deliverance of verses 22 onwards: ‘he has not hidden his face... but has listened to his cry for help.’ (v24)

Indeed, the psalm concludes by going beyond consolation to global salvation. Whatever has happened in the titanic struggle for life described in the first 21 verses has universal consequences: (v27) ‘All the ends of the earth will remember and turn to the Lord.’ More than that, the psalm concludes: (vv30-31) ‘posterity will serve him; future generations will be told about the Lord... declaring to a people yet unborn: “He has done it!”’

That last phrase reminds us of another word spoken by Jesus on the cross, a final word, not of defeat but of victory: ‘It is finished!’ (John 19:30) Psalm 22 *is* the Easter story, God’s vision of the salvation of humanity, bound up in the words of a 3,000 year old prayer-song. How on earth King David ‘saw’ it we’ll never know – but we can praise the Lord today that Jesus understood its meaning, lived it, and overcame. And we, too, can cry as the psalmist did: He has done it!

**Day 23 – Psalm 23 ‘The Shepherd’**

Well – what is there to say about the most famous chapter in all of scripture? If you’ve been a Christian for any length of time, you will probably have read or heard this psalm dozens of times. Indeed, it is one of the few portions of scripture which still has currency in Western culture; a fact which is even more surprising when you think how few of us actually know a real-life shepherd.

And yet the image of the loving shepherd giving everything to care for his sheep is one that resonates with us. And yet, it is vital that we don’t over-sentimentalise this psalm. To be a shepherd in ancient Israel was a tough calling; sheep faced a constant battle for survival – the best land was always farmed for crops, so green pastures were scarce, as were still waters. Sheep would fan out over a wide area to eat enough grass: the ‘right paths’ of the psalm describe those well-worn tracks which denote the places where enough food was to be had.

A shepherd would usually lead the flock personally, using a rod to beat off predators and hooked stick (staff) to yank unruly or wayward sheep back into line. The shepherd would also sleep at the entrance to the sheep pen – quite literally ‘the gate’ for the sheep. King David knew all this first-hand, of course – he was himself a shepherd before he became a king.

What it means though, is that this is not a psalm of lush pastures on pleasant summer evenings: the sort of rolling fields that we think of as characterising the English landscape. It is, rather, a psalm of dependence and survival in tough, semi-arid hill country. It is, in other words, a psalm for real life. A life marked by struggles, where the journey is uncertain and there are frequent obstacles.

Our great comfort – and why this psalm speaks so deeply to so many people – is that when life is like this, when it is hard and painful, we want a real God who loves real people with their real lives: and this is the kind of God we find here. This kind of shepherd is someone to whom we can take our grief and find hope. It doesn’t mean that we don’t walk through the valley of the shadow of death, but, in the midst of it, we find these simple yet immensely profound words: ‘you are with me.’

Ultimately, this psalm inevitably points us beyond David to the Good shepherd himself: Jesus Christ. A shepherd for every season of life, for green pastures and dark valleys, one whose goodness and love pursues us (the word ‘follow’ is a bit too passive a translation of the Hebrew word) all the days of our lives. Take a few moments today to pray through this psalm; and may the Good Shepherd be all you need today.

## *The Psalms, day-by-day (written 2023)*

### Day 24 – Psalm 24 ‘The Gates’

‘Clean hands and a pure heart.’ My mum would say this just before mealtimes, as a gentle (and sometimes not-so-gentle) reminder of the need to wash our hands before we ate. I never knew at the time where the phrase came from – if it’s one you’ve also heard before, then now you know! It’s a quote from Psalm 24, a description of the one who may ascend the mountain/hill of the Lord (vv3-4).

It’s a striking image – but, I must confess, using it as a definition of virtue in the context of eating meals doesn’t really do justice to what the image is meant to convey! ‘Clean hands’ does not in this case refer to physical cleanliness, rather to spiritual cleanliness. ‘Clean’ here means ‘innocent’: hands which have not done wrong, either by shedding blood, stealing goods or touching what is forbidden. Hence, clean hands and a pure heart.

The backdrop to this psalm is most likely the triumphal entry into Jerusalem in 2 Samuel 6, when King David brings back the ark into its rightful resting place at the heart of God’s people. Imagine the scene, as the head of the great procession raps hard on the great city gates, which open thunderously to allow the procession in: ‘be lifted up, you ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in.’ (v7)

The ark contained the tablets on which were written the Ten Commandments, and symbolised the presence of God with his people, who carried it with them in their forty years of wanderings in the desert. To lose it temporarily to their enemies was catastrophic: a judgment on the spiritual apathy and moral chaos of Israel during the time of the Judges. To regain it was more than a military victory: it symbolised the spiritual renewal of the nation under a righteous king (David), a sign of the restoration of God’s favour – the King of glory was indeed returning to Jerusalem, the heart of the nation both physically and spiritually.

Not that God stakes a claim only to one city, one small corner of the earth – far from it: ‘the earth is the Lord’s, and everything in it.’ That includes all the people as well (v1b): and the people are encouraged once more to seek the Lord’s face, in order to receive his blessing (vv5-6).

So we, too, hear this same word today. The Lord of glory knocks on the door of our hearts, too. May we welcome him in, and so, by his wonderful grace, receive his vindication and blessing.



## ***The Psalms, day-by-day (written 2023)***

### **Day 25 – Psalm 25 ‘The Hope’**

I've just finished reading 'The Wild Silence' by Raynor Winn. It's the sequel to 'The Salt Path', which tells the extraordinary story of how, after many years as tenant farmers, she and her husband were made homeless in their early 50s and, left with nothing but a tent and a few possessions (and a terrible diagnosis of a degenerative brain condition for her husband), decided to walk the South West Coast Path to try and plot a path to the future. They ended up in a small village in Cornwall, and The Wild Silence picks up the tale, as Raynor unexpectedly discovers a gift for writing and then – thanks to the way her first book touched many lives – they were offered the chance to re-wild a derelict farm nearby.

It's an amazing life journey, but what is most striking is Raynor's deep connection with the natural world. Faced with near impossible challenges, where does she go to find hope? For Raynor, she finds it in nature; and the book repeatedly details how she heads out into the 'wild silence' and finds new inspiration, new hope on a clifftop or a starry night or a dark forest.

For Raynor Winn, connecting with nature is a spiritual experience – and whilst she doesn't yet acknowledge the greater Being behind the beauty of nature (and I have felt led to pray this week that she will!) – her story does pose one of the great questions for every human being, in every age: where is the source of hope?

Today's Psalm is all about hope – and for King David, he is very clear where his source of hope is: (v5) 'you are God my Saviour, and my hope is in you all day long.'

Hope is a difficult word, often reduced to little more than wishful thinking. But for a follower of Christ, hope is the confident expectation that things will be better than they are – and we can have this confidence because of who our Lord is: good and upright (v8), able to guide and teach (v9), loving and faithful (v10), forgiving (v11), one who speaks and reassures us of his unconditional love (v14 – and as an aside, what an extraordinary truth that the Lord 'confides' in us!). It is strongly related to trust – see how trust and hope are used almost interchangeably in verses 1-3 – and ultimately 'no-one who hopes in you will ever be put to shame' (v3).

What makes this such good news is that it's not dependent on our goodness or likeability. David recognises the magnitude of his sins (v11), as well as his loneliness and troubles (vv16-17). But, still he trusts in God – indeed, his *hope* is in the Lord (v21). May our hope be in this wonderful Lord, too – whatever our troubles or afflictions. And may we find courage and grace to trust – all the day long.

## *The Psalms, day-by-day (written 2023)*

### Day 26 – Psalm 26 ‘The Test’

Summer is the season of tests. Across the country millions of young people have been sitting A-levels, or GCSEs, or SATs. My daughter received the results of her second-year uni exams yesterday (and got good news! – we’re very proud of her); and some of you no doubt are journeying similarly with children or grandchildren or children of friends, and wondering what the future holds for them.

Nowadays we tend to think of tests in quite a narrow way: usually in the sense of exams, or things which end up with a score or a pass/fail verdict. But the idea of being tested is much broader than that. Jesus actually refers to it directly in the great prayer he gave to us: ‘Do not bring us to testing’ – the literal translation of the line we usually say as ‘lead us not into temptation’ or ‘lead us not to the time of trial’. In other words, God recognises that tests are a large part of life – and generally a part that we’d like to avoid.

In today’s Psalm David is also thinking about tests – in two different ways. He refers to the testing he faces as part and parcel of his day-to-day life: the hypocrites, evildoers and bloodthirsty people always trying to get one over on him with their bribes and their schemes (vv4-5, 9-10). Perhaps the description of his life is a bit more dramatic than our lives – but the principle is the same. Life involves tests, challenges; and whilst we can’t control the actions of others (hence Jesus reassures us that it’s OK to pray for protection and deliverance), we can make our own choices about how we live – whether to swim with the tide or against it.

David is determined to swim against the tide – and in doing so, he refers to the second type of test: God’s own examination of his heart: (v2) ‘Test me, Lord, and try me, examine my heart and mind.’ Perhaps that sounds scary to many of us, a place of great vulnerability: letting the Almighty God go deep into our inner lives! But the truth is that God *is already there*; so, when David asks God to test him, what he is really asking for is self-revelation: that God would make him aware of anything he needs to address. It’s not that God doesn’t know it already – but perhaps *we don’t*?

Self-awareness is a great gift, it is a defining quality of most people who live fruitful lives. But it can only come from a place of humility, of being willing to open our whole lives – especially our inner lives, and not just what people can see – to the Lord. David took that plunge, and this psalm is an invitation for us to do the same. May our gracious, generous, gentle Lord grant us all grace to open our whole lives to him, that we might ‘stand on level ground’ (v12), praising the Lord in the great congregation.

## ***The Psalms, day-by-day (written 2023)***

### **Day 27 – Psalm 27 ‘The Dwelling’**

At the Royal Horticultural Society (RHS) Flower Show at Tatton Park in July (2023) there will be a very unusual entry: it’s a garden based on this very psalm – Psalm 27 – and is being sponsored by the Bible Society. Its designer is a young man called Ollie Pike, and if you want to find out the inspiration behind it, you can view that here (<https://www.biblesociety.org.uk/latest/psalm-27-garden/>).

Ollie first heard the Psalm at a funeral, and it really touched his soul. ‘It really spoke to me of hope and courage,’ he says, and these are sentiments which King David, the author of Psalm 27, would certainly have agreed with. As is often the case, David writes the psalm in a situation of peril. On this occasion we don’t know the particular threat, but he talks about ‘the wicked [who] advance against me to devour me’ (v2), and ‘the desire of my foes... spouting malicious accusations’ (v12).

Where does David find hope and courage? (v1) ‘*The Lord* is my light and my salvation – whom shall I fear?’ Yet, this remains contested territory in his soul, so to speak; there is anxiety lurking in his cries of vv7-8: ‘Hear my voice when I call, Lord... do not hide your face from me.’

Ultimately, in this psalm David finds his refuge in a particular place, which forms the heart of his prayer: (vv4-5) ‘One thing I ask from the Lord, this only do I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze on the beauty of the Lord and to seek him in his temple. For in the day of trouble he will keep me safe in his dwelling.’

The temple was the place where God dwelt; and viewed today through the lens of the New Testament, the extraordinary truth for followers of Jesus is that *we* are now the temple, because the Lord now dwells in us, by his Spirit – both as a community (Ephesians 2:21-22) and as individuals (1 Corinthians 6:19). Wow!

We can, therefore, ‘dwell’ in God right now, right where we are; we can gaze on the Lord’s beauty and seek his face. For Ollie Pike, the verse that speaks most to him is near the end: (v13) ‘I will see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.’ May that be a verse of hope and courage for us, too – and, today, may God grant us grace to be strong, take heart, and wait for the Lord.

## ***The Psalms, day-by-day (written 2023)***

### **Day 28 – Psalm 28 ‘The Cry’**

It could be said that all prayer essentially boils down to five short words: ‘Wow!’ describes what we might call adoration. Then there’s ‘Sorry’, ‘Thanks’ and ‘Please’. The fifth word is perhaps the one we use most often: ‘Help!’

Let’s acknowledge at the start that God is not disappointed by this. Much as we hope that our prayer life slowly moves more and more towards ‘wow’ and ‘thanks’, the Lord is wonderfully gracious and knows what we’re like. After all, he was happy to become flesh and make his dwelling among us (John 1:14) – he gets us.

And ‘help’ is, after all, a cry of dependence and trust. It’s the core of our psalm today: (v2) ‘Hear my cry for mercy as I call to you for help, as I lift up my hands towards your Most Holy Place.’ King David is anxious, he even fears silence from heaven (v1). In dark times, it’s a thought that can disturb us: what if God is deaf to our prayers? Even if we know in our heads that he hears, we can all sometimes doubt it in our hearts.

Thankfully God is not like us – he doesn’t get upset at the poverty of our faith, rather he draws close to us, gently and kindly. He takes our cries for help at face value.

Today’s psalm reads a little like a before-and-after scenario – it reminds me of a makeover show with the actual makeover removed from the middle! The desperate plea and perilous situation of verses 1-5 (‘before’) changes dramatically at v6 to the aftermath. What happened in between? We don’t know – but the great turning point is the simple realisation by David that *God really does hear his prayers* (v6). Even if the change in circumstances might be some way off, sometimes the tipping point is simply to know that we’ve been heard.

For David, that gives him great joy (v7) and strength (v8). May that be our experience, too. We may be walking through a dark valley: but, as the psalm wonderfully concludes, our loving Shepherd still carries us – for ever.

**Day 29 – Psalm 29 ‘The Glory’**

One of the most memorable evenings I can remember took place almost 30 years ago. In those days I was a youth worker, and one Friday evening in July we took a group out for a walk on Coombe Hill, which is the highest point in the Chiltern Hills, just south of Aylesbury. From there you can look out over the whole Vale of Aylesbury, and on this muggy summer’s evening we could tell, as we walked up to the hill’s monument, that a storm was brewing.

We all sat down, looking out over the landscape, and over the next half hour we watched the storm as it passed along the Vale. From our high vantage point, we could literally see the lightning bursts forming and shattering the atmosphere, followed a few seconds later by the resulting thunderclap – all from the safety of a few miles’ distance (and thankfully the storm missed us, so we stayed dry as the vale was drenched).

It was an awesome sight, one I still remember vividly more than half my life later. I wonder if King David witnessed something similar 3,000 years ago, because today’s psalm picks up a similar theme. It is one of the ‘majestic’ psalms, which praise God’s greatness, indeed his glory. The word ‘glory’ (Hebrew *kabod*) literally means weight, and here the ‘weight’ of God is tangibly expressed in the glorious power of a thunderstorm, which shakes the desert (v8) and strips the forests bare (v9).

The thunder which results is described as the voice of God – the word appears (a perfect) seven times. Even if, today, we might understand that it is electrical charges in the atmosphere which cause lightning, which itself creates the sonic waves that we hear as thunder, to the ancient mind, this was literally a mighty voice from the sky, and therefore why not God’s voice?

Before we dismiss that as pre-modern fantasising, we’ve seen already in previous psalms (notably Psalm 19) how creation is viewed as the book of God, as God’s ‘voice without words’, telling the story of his majesty and greatness. Even today, we have precious little capacity to tame the power of a storm, only the technical know-how to build structures that (usually) withstand it.

We, too, can take great comfort that this Almighty God – our God – is enthroned over creation (v10). So, as we give God the glory, we can also graciously receive from him both strength and peace (v11). And may we worship the Lord in the splendour of his holiness today.

## *The Psalms, day-by-day (written 2023)*

### Day 30 – Psalm 30 ‘The Exaltation’

In February 2023 a 19-month old toddler was rescued safely from a 50-ft well in Thailand. The well had been newly dug, but had been carelessly left uncovered after it failed to strike water. The toddler spent 18 hours at the bottom before being lifted to safety, thanks to a huge team, careful digging and a strong red rope. Her successful rescue made news around the world, and thankfully she suffered only minor injuries.

Today’s Psalm is all about lifting, too. Two liftings, in fact. What occasioned the Psalm is David being ‘lifted out of the depths’ (v1) – by God. We’re not sure if David is referring to specific physical danger, or if the image is primarily spiritual. But, like the toddler, David sees himself as helpless unless it is God who lifts him out: (v2) ‘Lord my God, I called to you for help and you healed me... you spared me from going down to the pit.’

The pit is an ancient way of understanding death, and thanks to his survival, David too does some ‘heavy lifting’ of his own. The word *exalt* means to ‘lift up’, and what David wants to do is exalt (lift up) the Lord himself. As David has been lifted by God, so now he lifts up God’s name, and his glorious qualities: his capacity for healing (v2) and for mercy (v3), his holiness (v4), and most significantly in this psalm, his favour (v5).

What David says about God in v5 is such an important message for us to hear. We often think of God as being, if not angry, then mostly disappointed with us. But David says that the opposite is actually true: (v5) ‘his anger lasts only a moment, but his favour lasts a lifetime.’

The Puritan writer Thomas Goodwin draws the contrast between God’s ‘strange work’ and his ‘natural work’, when describing the text in Deuteronomy that God’s punishment passes down three or four generations, but his love lasts for a thousand generations. In other words, as Goodwin interprets, God’s strange work is punishment, but *his natural work is love*. Or, as David says here in this psalm: ‘his anger lasts only a moment, but his favour lasts a lifetime.’

Wherever you find yourself today, take heart from this beautiful truth. If it is a time for weeping, remember that, in the Lord, rejoicing comes in the morning (v5). If it is a time to wail, then eventually we will find ourselves able to dance (v11). May this wonderful thought cause our spirits to exalt the Lord, too, that our hearts may sing his praises and not be silent (v12). Amen!

**Day 31 – Psalm 31 ‘The Committal’**

A man is dying, more or less alone save for his mother and a few friends. He is in distress, weak, not just from loss of blood and many physical injuries, but from sorrow at a broken world. He grieves the betrayal of one friend and the cowardice of many others. His strength is failing, and as he dies, publicly for all to see, he recognises that most of those who have come to watch are full of contempt for him. If you really are the special one, they spit, save yourself from this predicament! He feels forgotten, his body like broken pottery: many have plotted to take his life for some time, and now their wish has been fulfilled.

As his breath starts to give out, his troubled mind turns to the scriptures that have held him, nourished him, sustained and shaped him through his whole life. These scriptures are the bedrock on which his feet can still stand in a spacious place, even while everything else collapses. He knows his work is complete: he has already cried out to those watching that it is finished. And so he utters one last audible phrase, a verse from a psalm which mirrors his situation – one last beautiful truth that no-one can take away from him: not the authorities, not his enemies, not even death itself: ‘Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.’ When he has spoken this out, declared it not just to those around him but to the world and all future generations that will succeed him, then he breathes his last....

Psalm 31 is not particularly well known, and it never appears on a list of people’s favourite psalms. Its context is bleak, and (we might as well admit this) it’s one of the longer ones, too. We like the ones which are 6-12 verses – but a 24-verser needs a decent ratio of upbeat stuff, and Psalm 31 doesn’t have quite enough of that to make it onto our ‘favourites playlist’.

But it is a vitally important psalm, for one verse alone – verse 5, a verse quoted by the Son of God at the climax of his life. When Jesus seeks solace in the terrible agonies he is enduring, he comes here, to Psalm 31. He knows his situation reflects exactly what David writes in verses 9-13, and we can look back and give thanks that David unconsciously – but prophetically – wrote words which were fulfilled by Jesus Christ a thousand years later, words which held him and gave him comfort even as he was dying. Jesus committed his spirit into his Father’s hands, knowing that his work was done.

Ultimately, to commit our spirits into the Lord’s hands is not an act of death but of *life*. Jesus knew that – three days later, the world did. Likewise, we can also commit our spirits into the Lord’s hands every day: it is an act of trust (14) – trust in the Lord, who holds our times in his hands (v15). And as we do that today, so may we know the abundance of the Lord’s goodness (v19) and the shelter of his presence (v20).

## *The Psalms, day-by-day (written 2023)*

### Day 32 – Psalm 32 ‘The Covering’

At this time of year, our family is usually getting ready to camp for at least part of our summer holiday. Not this year, I must confess – the older I get, the more I struggle with thin mats to sleep on and stiff backs in the morning! Though, sat outside on a warm evening with a (plastic) glass of good red wine and a glorious sunset to watch, there’s nothing like it.

Probably the most important part of our annual preparations is the ‘tent material check’ – i.e. the time spent in checking the seams and (usually) re-spraying it with water-proofing spray. It doesn’t matter how much a tent *appears* to be water-proof – anyone who camps knows that a night’s rain finds relentless ways to drip onto your head! The first rule of every camping trip is to be properly covered overnight. If that happens, then you can cope with everything else.

The idea of a complete covering is central to today’s psalm: only this time, it’s our sins which are ‘covered’ by the Lord (v1). The idea of covering works in three ways in this psalm: first (though not first in order), we see that King David does not ‘cover up’ his sins before God (v5). This is crucial, because for God to ‘cover’ them with his forgiveness, we first must *uncover* them before him. It’s so tempting for us to try to cover over our sins – the problem is that it doesn’t work. Like putting on jumper over a dirty shirt, the stain is still there underneath the jumper. I’m sure none of you have ever done that....!

God, however, can provide a much more effective covering for this universal human problem, one which brings both forgiveness (v1) and removal of guilt (v5). This is the second, and life-giving covering. Scholars have argued as to whether this ‘covering’ effectively means that the ‘stain’ is still there, but the removal of guilt surely suggests that the covering is so complete the stain is irrelevant.

But there is yet a third covering: the shelter of God’s mercy. Or as David puts it: (v7) ‘you are my hiding place’. Like the best tent, no matter how much the rain beats down, we are safe inside; we are covered by the Lord, surrounding and protecting us. This verse has been made famous by Corrie ten Boom’s autobiography, called ‘The Hiding Place’, telling the dramatic story of how her family sheltered Jewish people during the war. In her story, the hiding place was both what her family offered those at risk, and also how the Lord himself acted as Corrie’s ‘hiding place’ when she was eventually arrested and sent to a concentration camp (which thankfully she survived).

We may not face Corrie’s challenges: but the Lord remains our hiding place, too. As we close this week, may we rest secure knowing that the Lord has not only covered our sins but surrounds us with songs of deliverance. And may that cause us to rejoice and be glad (v11).



**Day 33 – Psalm 33 ‘The Template’**

One of the things you learn at vicar factory is how to plan a service or act of worship. To most of us, these things seem to flow of their own accord – and that’s absolutely right, that’s how it should appear: something natural, innately logical. But you won’t be surprised to learn that there is also a bit of thinking behind it, and although there are various schools of thought as to how a Christian meeting should be put together, it’s remarkable how much of the Christian world’s worship follows a consistent pattern. The style might vary, the length, the language, the cultural trappings, so to speak – but the template is recognisable in most places across the world.

If you’ve ever wondered why there is such consistency, today’s psalm helps provide some of the answers. It’s a brilliant (though little known) piece of scripture, and what’s remarkable about this psalm (the first one whose author is unknown since Psalm 10, and only the fourth so far not ‘of David’) is how the template for approaching Almighty God was very much in existence three millennia ago. This psalm is like a rich, four-course meal: it has everything in its 22 verses, including a perfect template for how to meet with the Lord:

Worship (vv1-3) – the psalm begins with an invitation to praise, especially musical praise, through song and instrument. It also reminds us to sing a ‘new song’: the Lord’s character, love and faithfulness do not change, but it is good and healthy (‘fitting’ v1) to keep thinking of new ways to express it!

Word (vv4-9) – noting that God’s word is both true (v4) and powerful (v6); as we do in our services and meetings today, we place the Word of God at the centre, teaching and reminding us of who God is.

Witness (vv10-12) – even as we worship and listen to God’s Word, we are reminded that what we do is not an inward-looking activity; it equips us to engage with the world. God is the Lord of the whole earth, and what goes on in the world matters to him. Nevertheless, we are blessed to worship this God (v12), who watches (v14, another ‘W’!) all who live here on earth. That sense of privilege inevitably calls us to desire for others what we have experienced for ourselves: namely, to know this wonderful Lord for themselves, and to experience those same blessings.

Waiting (vv16-22) – with this heavenly perspective on life, we can now turn our needs to the Lord in prayer. It is interesting that this psalm may well have been written in a time of need – famine is specifically mentioned in v19, so we can take heart again that this psalm of praise and faith is not an escape from reality – rather it speaks *into* that reality, it helps us to face that reality with eyes and hearts lifted.

As we feast on this rich, four-course psalm today, may its simple template shape our lives, and raise our faith for all that lies ahead. In him our hearts rejoice, for we trust in his holy name. Amen.

## *The Psalms, day-by-day (written 2023)*

### Day 34 – Psalm 34 ‘The Taste’

I’ve always loved my food. I don’t have a big appetite, but I enjoy eating pretty much everything – finding as much joy in cheese and beans on toast as a gourmet dish. At school it became a lunchtime ritual for my friends to dare me to taste a bit of everything together, including mains and pudding. Like Remy in the film ‘Ratatouille’, you’d be amazed what surprising flavour combinations you can experience!

Today’s psalm reminds us of another kind of taste, albeit in many ways a spiritual version of tasting a bit of everything together in life: (v8) ‘Taste and see that the Lord is good.’ It was written after a particularly dramatic moment in David’s story (you can read the whole saga in 1 Samuel 21): fleeing from King Saul, and effectively under arrest with the Philistine king Achish (introduced in the starting notes to the psalm by the royal name Abimelek or Abimelech, depending on your translation) he pretended to be mad and was eventually run out of town.

What is instructive about David’s take on this escape is that he attributes its success not to his cunning, but to the Lord’s intervention and protection: (v6) ‘This poor man called, and the Lord heard him; he saved him out of all his troubles.’ In other words, although David took initiative, he knew that unless God changed the heart of King Achish, he was done for. David was rightly afraid (v4); but he recognises another, fruitful ‘fear’ – better translated as ‘awe’ or ‘reverence’ – the fear of the Lord. It is this reverent awe which invites both the Lord’s protection (v7) and provision (v9).

On this occasion, David wants to use his experience not just to testify but to teach (v11). He has learnt invaluable lessons, but, in the second half of the psalm, he wants to make sure we learn them, too. He is candid that even the righteous will have many troubles (v19), many challenges in this life – but we can trust the Lord to deliver us.

And so, back to the key verse of this psalm: to anyone who faces challenges, David’s advice is simple: ‘taste and see that the Lord is good’. In other words, give trusting God a try. Taste and see. See what happens, see what the Lord is able to do.

It’s great advice, and one which increasingly I offer to those who ask me. My years of Christian leadership and training have given me lots of arguments to persuade people; but in the end, what turns a person’s heart to the Lord most often is simply to ‘taste and see’. If God is real – as we know he is – then he’ll come through, we will experience that reality for ourselves. So, whatever you face today, may that be your reality, too. And as we recognise that the Lord’s eyes and ears are turned towards us (v15), let us exalt his name together!

## *The Psalms, day-by-day (written 2023)*

### Day 35 – Psalm 35 ‘The Contender’

Twenty years ago, I was given permission by my then employer to run an Alpha Course in our office at work. We ran it at lunchtime in one of the company meeting rooms, and I put small adverts up on the office noticeboards around our building. About 15 people gathered for the first session – 5 of our little Christian group and about 10 guests. Everything was going well until we got to a Q&A after the talk and one of my colleagues got up and gave an impassioned speech against what we were doing.

As you can imagine, we were a little floored by this – he had in fact gone to the CEO trying to get it stopped before we met, but the CEO, to her credit, had stood her ground; and so he came to disrupt the event itself. It was tense, but honest, and to be fair to him, he never lost control, although the meeting couldn't really run as planned from that point. (As an aside, it backfired: a couple of the people who had come as guests – really just to take a look – were so outraged by what happened, they told me that they were now determined to come to the rest of the course regardless!)

Later that week he asked to meet me for a coffee. I was nervous about what was coming next, but to my surprise he came to apologise. The evening after the event he had received an unexpected phone call from a Christian relative, who hadn't called him for a long time – but had got in touch that very day. He was very challenged by this, and saw it as something akin to a spiritual sign. He said that he felt that God was on his case, and whilst he couldn't agree with what we were doing, he would do nothing more, and he was keen to shake hands and make peace.

Sometimes when things are out of our control, we need to God to intervene for us. Today's Psalm is King David's prayer for that to happen in his own challenging situation: (v1) 'Contend, Lord, with those who contend with me.'

As we have often observed in the psalms thus far, even if we can sympathise with David's predicament we may feel a little uncomfortable with the directness of his imprecations throughout these verses – and it is fair to soften these through the lens of New Testament grace and compassion. However, the underlying principle remains true: in times of trial God contends for us, on our behalf. When we face opposition, we are not alone. Moreover, in inviting God to act, this avoids us becoming either passive victims or agents of our own vengeance. Rather, we let God pull the strings. And when God does intervene – as he did for us twenty years ago, quietly but miraculously – how much more can we praise him (v9, vv27-28), having seen him at work!

For all followers of Christ facing such challenges, it is a great comfort to know that God contends for his people. If that is your situation, let today increase your faith to release it into God's hands. And if that is not the place you find yourself, then take the chance to pray for all our sisters and brothers who face such opposition, that they may know the Lord's vindication, as he contends on their behalf.

## *The Psalms, day-by-day (written 2023)*

### Day 36 – Psalm 36 ‘The Proud’

Human nature doesn't change. For all our scientific and technological advancements in the last couple of centuries, the underlying problems remain the same. In fact, not problems plural – really just one problem, singular: that little word 'sin'. The context changes, but the heart of the human problem remains the problem of the human heart.

I am a Christian for lots of reasons – I have been drawn into the saving love and infinite grace of Christ, both through belief and experience; I have found in the community of believers something I don't find anywhere else; and I have seen God at work in my life, over many years now. I am also a Christian because I have found that the bible's diagnosis of the human condition to be by far the most truthful, most realistic of any I have encountered. For all that we humans are capable of great good, we have to find a satisfactory answer for why, much of the time, we are not – for our innate selfishness, and how to address it.

Today's description of how a proud (v11) heart gets corrupted in verses 1-4 was written 3,000 years ago – but it could have been written today. We may have swapped our papyrus scrolls for smartphones, our sandals for trainers and brogues, our donkeys for e-vehicles and our small hamlets of subsistence farming for large cities and multi-story buildings – but the diagnosis of human corruption is just the same, manifesting the same characteristics:

Narcissism (v2) – all they really see is themselves; lack of self-awareness (v2) – the natural outworking of their narcissism, they cannot see the wrong that they do and harm that they cause; lying (v3) – deceit comes naturally to their lips; lacking wisdom to make good choices and choosing not to get involved rather than to actively do good (v3); when given a choice, they choose to swim with the tide and do wrong – and invest their thinking time planning for that, and justifying it to themselves (v4). Ultimately, such people live as if God does not exist in any meaningful sense (v1) – or if he does, he isn't interested in how they live (meaning they can do what they want). Their only object of worship is themselves and their needs, ambitions and desires.

Sound familiar? And whilst we can all think of people who tick many of those boxes, we also have to acknowledge that we're not immune to those impulses, too. There, but for the grace of God... and that's the point. Look at the contrast with those who look to the Lord (vv5-9) – and this psalm is really all about the eyes (v1, v9), about *where we direct our gaze*. If we direct it only to ourselves and our desires, we end up with the sort of life and character we see in vv1-4.

If, on the other hand, we direct it towards the unfailing love, faithfulness and righteousness of the Lord, then we find a completely different way to live. The Lord becomes our refuge (v7), the Lord provides abundantly for us (v8) and fills us with true joy (v8). Ultimately, David uses this beautiful image of God as the fountain of life (v9) – in other words life-giving water gushing continuously from him. If we direct our eyes towards the light of the Lord, then what we also see is light (v9) – our gaze is directed away from the darkness, and we view things through the glorious lens of light.

Today, may the Lord direct our gaze towards his light. May that light reveal any darkness in our own hearts – and may it also direct us to pray with compassion for those who, like us, desperately need the light of the Lord. For only with him is the fountain of life.

## *The Psalms, day-by-day (written 2023)*

### Day 37 – Psalm 37 ‘The Meek’

This psalm became very precious to me in the year 2000. I undertook a piece of research for a client which unexpectedly got me involved in a very nasty local dispute over a planning development. Our client – the developer – wanted to prove there was support for the scheme and commissioned us to take a survey of local residents. 9 out of 10 results were positive, one was not. For two days I was pressured by the client to remove the one unfavourable result and release only the other nine. I refused, and eventually the client gave in and released the whole report, including to the local press who published the results on their front page: ‘survey demonstrates support for...’.

The following day, the group which opposed the development did two things: they reported me to the Market Research Society for alleged breach of professional standards, and then released that information to the local media – so the following day’s headline: ‘survey backing development reported for breach...’

The irony was that, if I had given in to client pressure and withheld information, I would indeed have breached my professional code of conduct and been sacked (and the project discredited). But because I had released the whole survey, and could therefore prove that I had reported fairly, the Market Research Society dismissed the allegation – cue headline several weeks later: ‘Case dismissed, survey stands after all!’ The developer who had pressured me to lie was in the end very glad that I didn’t: the development subsequently received planning approval and was built.

It is horrible both to be pressured to sin, and also to be wrongly accused – especially when you know what it had already cost you to do the right thing. In this difficult time, I found comfort in two places: from the example of Jesus himself, who knew far better than I did what it was to be wrongly accused; and from this psalm – especially verses 1-11 (and it’s a long one, if you can only manage verses 1-11 you’ll get the gist well enough!).

Suddenly this psalm spoke directly to me. I was in the same situation as the psalmist, at the mercy of other people’s schemes (v7), anxious because of it (v1, v7). This psalm reassured me of several truths: first, evil never wins in the end – it might succeed in the short term but not for ever (v2). Second, all I could do was to trust in the Lord (v3) and commit my way to him (v5) – if I did that, then eventually the Lord would vindicate me (v6). I knew I was innocent, but I was reliant on others to declare that – nevertheless, my prayer was that the Lord would contend on my behalf (see Psalm 35 two days ago!) So, I found strength to wait patiently (v7) and be still.

And I can genuinely look back and say that the Lord did give me a divinely-sent peace through all of this. I can testify that this psalm is true, and real. In the end – as Jesus reminded us a thousand years later – the meek really do inherit the land (v11); i.e. the gentle, the humble, the ones who don’t plot and scheme for their own advantage, but let the Lord contend for them. Psalms 34-37 are mostly psalms of trial; but we have a divine Contender. And may our gracious God continue to fill us with hope, both to wait and to overcome. Amen.

## ***The Psalms, day-by-day (written 2023)***

### **Day 38 – Psalm 38 ‘The Wounds’**

*Almighty and most merciful Father, we have erred and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep, we have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts, we have offended against thy holy laws, we have left undone those things which we ought to have done, and we have done those things which we ought not to have done. And there is no health in us. But thou, O Lord, have mercy upon us, miserable offenders; spare thou them, O God, which confess their faults, restore thou them that are penitent, according to thy promises declared unto mankind in Christ Jesu our Lord; and grant, O most merciful Father, for his sake, that we may hereafter live a godly, righteous, and sober life, to the glory of thy holy Name. Amen.*

That is the standard confession at both Morning and Evening prayer in the Anglican Book of Common Prayer. In other words, a devout Anglican in years gone by would have said this twice a day, or up to fourteen times a week, or as many as 730 times a year! In addition, were this devout Anglican to go to Communion on Sunday they would confess using the following words (and, until the pandemic, our monthly early morning communion service used these very words):

*‘...we acknowledge and bewail our manifold sins and wickedness, which we from time to time most grievously have committed, by thought word and deed, against thy Divine Majesty, provoking most justly thy wrath and indignation against us.... The remembrance of them is grievous unto us; the burden of them is intolerable. Have mercy upon us, have mercy upon us, most merciful Father...’*

As my old vicar used to say, when you say the prayer book confessions, you are *properly* confessed. But as we read these words today, I suspect many of us recoil slightly. This kind of approach to ‘the sinfulness of sin’ (a phrase coined by Ralph Venning in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, around the time of the publication of the current Prayer Book) is nowadays dismissed as ‘worm theology’ – too negative, too self-punishing, too little focus on the good things about faith.

But David knew the secret 3,000 years ago. If there is no sin, there is no grace. We don’t know what he’d done prior to writing this psalm, but we can see is how conscious he is of the destructive effects of sin – not just to his relationships (vv10-12) and his soul (v9, vv17-18) but even to his health (vv3-8). These are all wounds (v5, v11) caused by the most fundamental of human problems, one affecting us all: our inability to curb our selfishness and unhealthy desires, our desire to run our own lives and shut God out. In a word, our sin.

It may be unfashionable to treat our sin like this nowadays, but it is also the path to true freedom. Just as David mourns the Lord’s disfavour, so he knows that the only ‘cure’ is the Lord’s favour (vv21-22). He appeals to God’s mercy, as the only one who can come quickly to help him.

And this God is the same yesterday, today and forever. We, too, can take all the dysfunctions in our lives and bring them before him. It is healthy to confess – and we confess to a merciful God who, thanks to Christ, we know will come quickly to help us. So, take a moment to confess today; and there may you find, grace, freedom, and hope. ‘Lord, I wait for you; you will answer, Lord my God.’

## ***The Psalms, day-by-day (written 2023)***

### **Day 39 – Psalm 39 ‘The Muzzle’**

Today’s psalm is a counterpart to yesterday’s Psalm 38. In both Psalms David has some sort of health problem which might prove fatal – probably the same illness/disease/condition. In Psalm 38 he reflected on this affliction in the context of his sinful behaviour and need for confession. Today, in Psalm 39, he considers his affliction as something which confronts him with his own mortality.

For an ‘action man’ like David, the reality of his mortality is a troubling one, and in this psalm he asks for grace to make his peace with it in two different ways. First, there is the personal dimension: (v4) ‘Show me, Lord, my life’s end and the number of my days; let me know how fleeting my life is.’ In this Psalm, David brilliantly captures the ambiguity which most people of faith feel when facing the reality of their mortality. On one hand, we know that death is not the end, that there is something better and more wonderful to look forward to. On the other hand, we still enjoy life and want it to continue a while longer here!

The New Bible Commentary puts this dilemma very well: ‘The brevity of life and the sadness of death run throughout the Bible and the full revelation of the immortal world does not remove them. This life is precious. Its joys and loves may be transcended but they cannot be replaced. To be bereaved is ‘sorrow upon sorrow’ (Philippians 2:27); our own leaving of this life cannot be contemplated with unmixed equanimity, even though heaven is sure.’

And so, David asks for grace to make his peace with the reality of death, even as he also asks for grace to be spared a little longer: (v13) ‘Look away from me (note: not asking God to leave him, but rather to delay his death), that I may enjoy life again, before I depart and am no more.’

There is a second dimension to David’s reflection: he is unwilling to speak of his possible death among ‘the wicked’ – he initially determines to put ‘a muzzle on my mouth’ (v1). This might be because he (understandably) struggles to show weakness with those who wish him harm. Given what he says here, though, it seems more likely that what he fears is that his death will in some way undermine the witness of his faith. In a culture which equated health with divine blessing, he fears that knowledge of his affliction will lead people to scorn his faith, and the Lord he serves (v8).

He may even consider that the affliction of someone thought to be righteous might lead the wicked to even more wrongdoing, since it is David who is afflicted, and not them. Here, David’s warning in verses 5-6 applies universally: none of us knows how long we’ve got, and ‘we can’t take it with us when we go’, to coin a phrase. This is what he longs to share with these people, and what causes his heart to burn as he tried to hold his tongue (vv2-3). He wants all of us to see the facing of our mortality as something which both gives us a true perspective on life, *and* turns us back to our loving Creator. If ‘the wicked’ truly believed in the reality of death and judgement, would they (or anyone) live as they did?

These are never easy things to reflect on: but, as someone who deals with death and dying every week in his work, I can testify that our reluctance to talk about these things causes far more harm than good. May God grant us grace, each of us, to face our mortality – and as we lay our lives before God, so to find peace, and freedom, to enjoy whatever days we have left in the love, light and grace of the Lord.

## ***The Psalms, day-by-day (written 2023)***

### **Day 40 – Psalm 40 ‘The Proclamation’**

Forty years ago, the rock band U2 were finishing the recording of their third album ‘War’. It was 6am, and they had to vacate the studio by 8am – but they felt they were one track short. The bass player had already gone home, but the guitarist had the tune for a final song. In desperation, the lead singer Bono turned to his favourite psalm (40) and wrote some lyrics in ten minutes, the guitarist played both bass and guitar, and the whole track was mixed in an hour. It became the final song ‘40’ on the album, and through the 1980s was the song which closed all of U2’s concerts – and still has, even recently. It has been played more than 400 times and is one of U2 fans’ favourites.

In many ways, the song ‘40’ does exactly what the psalmist encourages us all to do: to proclaim the saving acts of God publicly (v9). Whether or not you like their music, Bono has a great testimony of faith, and has never been afraid to speak openly about it, just as David did: (vv9-10) ‘I do not seal my lips, Lord, as you know... I speak of your faithfulness and your saving help. I do not conceal your love and your faithfulness from the great assembly.’

After the trials of psalms 38 and 39, psalm 40 offers something of a resolution. Truthfully, we don’t know if it was designed to accompany the previous two, but, even if it was written at another time, its testimony of salvation fits very well here: (vv1-2) ‘I waited patiently for the Lord; he turned to me and heard my cry. He lifted me out of the slimy pit, out of the mud and mire.’

However, the particular focus of this psalm is on the heart of the psalmist. For all that his physical circumstances have changed, what David is most acutely aware of is what is going on in his *heart*: first, his obedient heart (v8), then his testifying heart (v10) and finally his failing heart (v12).

This last reference to his heart is vital, since this is not a message of easy victory; the sort of binary ‘before and after’ testimony which we love to hear but often fails to show the reality of the ongoing challenges of life. Yes, David has been restored, he has prevailed over his affliction; but he is acutely conscious that he remains a weak and flawed human being. He still battles with sin, which causes his heart to fail (v12); he still has enemies who desire his ruin (vv14-15). He may be victorious for now – but he still thinks of himself as ‘poor and needy (v17).

It is this humility which makes this psalm so precious to so many people. It is a psalm of real life: not ‘happy ever after’ (at least this side of the grave), but of continuing dependence upon God. That said, we can still savour the good days and the small victories. God put a new song in David’s mouth (v3) – one of his very best. May he graciously give you a new song, too.



## ***The Psalms, day-by-day (written 2023)***

### **Day 41 – Psalm 41 ‘The Betrayal’**

When I was a teenager my uncle taught me how to shake hands. He’s a businessman and he said to me: ‘You’ve got to grip tight, Matt, so that people know you’re strong.’ His handshake used to stop the blood flow to my hand, so this is what I learned to do; as I’ve got older, I’ve eased the grip somewhat, as handshaking is meant to be a pleasant and sociable experience!

As I look back, what interests me is this idea of the importance of the projection of strength. Anything less is a sign of weakness, the suggestion that you’re the sort of person that could be taken advantage of – so you offer a vice-like grip as both a greeting and, dare I say it, a warning?

The same could be said of many people’s attitudes towards those who are less fortunate in life. Much as we like to espouse care for the weak in principle, in practice many fear that showing care will lead them to be taken advantage of, that they’ll get a reputation for being a ‘soft touch’. King David is having none of it, as he says right at the beginning of today’s psalm: (vv1-3) ‘Blessed are those who have regard for the weak; the Lord delivers them in time of trouble. The Lord protects them and preserves them... and restores them from their bed of illness.’

The latter line suggests we may still be addressing the consequences of David’s affliction in psalms 38-40 – but either way, David’s trust in the Lord follows this line of reasoning: if we care for the weak, then, when we’re weak ourselves, the Lord will care for us. Perhaps others will care, too – but even if there are those who wish to see us come to harm, we can rely on God to do for us as we have done for others.

In the psalm, David testifies at the end that this has, indeed, been the case: (vv11-12) ‘My enemy does not triumph over me. Because of my integrity you uphold me and set me in your presence for ever.’ But David’s trust has certainly been tested. He has one particular person in mind, whom he considers has betrayed him: (v9) ‘Even my close friend, someone I trusted, one who shared my bread, has turned against me.’

This is another psalm which is known for one verse – this last one, in fact, as it echoes Jesus’ experience with Judas – the one who shares his bread with Jesus (Mark 14:20) is the one who betrays him (Mark 14:10). But its deeper context is an encouragement for all of us to keep showing the care and compassion of Christ to those who need it – because when we need it, the Lord will give the same to us. Perhaps that is a word for some of you today, or for someone you know. Claim its truth, and may that cause you to lift your spirit in prayer (v10), and your heart in praise (v13).

## ***The Psalms, day-by-day (written 2023)***

### **Day 42 – Psalm 42 ‘The Thirst’**

July 2023 has seen record temperatures across much of Europe, and in many other places around the world, too. In fact, a period of week or so early in the month was the hottest set of days on earth since detailed recording began, and 4<sup>th</sup> July was estimated to be the hottest day on earth for 100,000 years. I don't propose to reflect on the causes or consequences of that, but the dominant image of thirst which begins this psalm has a certain amount of currency in that context.

Our climate in the UK is more temperate, but many of us remember 40C the previous July, and most of us know what a raging thirst feels like. I think back to playing sport in the summer and the desperate need to rehydrate. Although the time I accidentally put washing-up liquid and not lime juice into a bottle of Soda Stream (remember those?) didn't help me much! Tip: definitely don't try that one at home.

Thirst is not just a physical thing – as today's psalm makes clear. There is such a thing as spiritual thirst; and if physical thirst feels like a compulsion, then the same can be true spiritually as well. We can sense the desperation of the psalmist in the opening lines: (vv1-3) 'As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God? My tears have been my food day and night...'

Like an animal pants, the psalmist cries, so they pant, too. They are desperate for God – particularly to sense the presence of God, to encounter him directly (v2). The context is a spiritually hostile climate, where people mock the reality of God (v3) and where worship has withered (v4). This causes a deep depression (v6, v9), experienced as practically a physical pain (v10), where weeping is normal (v3).

We all experience similar dry times in our spiritual lives. Times when God seems on mute, when we feel overwhelmed either by our own troubles, or by the sense of living as strangers in a hostile culture. I love this psalm because it gives voice to those feelings, those experiences. It names the pain, and the sensation of spiritual thirst.

But it also focuses our eyes beyond the thirst to the thirst-quencher. The psalmist takes himself/herself in hand in v5 and v11 – for all that their pain is real, it is not the end of the story. We are not on our own: we have somewhere we can put our hope, or rather Someone in whom we can put our hope. And the declaration is that we will *yet* praise God again. Note the 'yet' – it may take time, but like all things, this too shall pass. We *will* know the Lord's presence again, our thirst will be satisfied, we will yet praise Him.

If this psalm speaks particularly to you today, claim the whole of it; name the pain, the thirst, but hold onto v5 and v11 – because, despite everything, we will yet praise him, our Saviour and our God.

## ***The Psalms, day-by-day (written 2023)***

### **Day 43 – Psalm 43 ‘The Postscript’**

‘These two psalms [42 and 43] are certainly one and we cannot tell why they are divided.’ So begins the New Bible Commentary reflection on this psalm. We don’t know the answer to that one: if we treat them as one psalm, then what you have are three balanced stanzas – 42:1-5, 42:6-11, 43:1-5 – each of which finishes with the same refrain, and each of which has common phrases and elements: ‘why have you forgotten/rejected me?’; ‘why must I go about mourning?’; ‘how I used to go to the house of God/then I will go to the altar of God.’

Perhaps, today, I can suggest one reason. It’s only a guess, so this is not ‘gospel’: but maybe, just maybe, it’s because the message of this psalm is so vital, so powerful, and so common, that it *deserves repetition*.

Israel’s pattern of worship used daily psalms, as many Christian traditions do now. As we saw yesterday, the psalmist cries out to God in hope, but recognises that the answer – the satisfaction of his or her thirst – may not come immediately: ‘I will yet praise him.’ So why not return and ask again tomorrow? Why not acknowledge that this is a prayer we need to keep on praying?

This (pair of) heartfelt psalms is an internal dialogue of despair and hope. It recognises that finding or seizing real hope is hard, and needs repeated claiming. Just as v5 of Psalm 42 is followed by v6 – in other words, the call to put our hope in God is followed by another lament – so splitting off the third stanza into another psalm (to be said/sung/prayed another day or another time) allows for that dialogue to continue, and also allows for that repetition of the key call which concludes each ‘conversation’: to put our hope in God.

We are all weak, all prone to swings of despair and hope, doubt and faith, sadness and joy. The psalmist’s internal dialogues feel much like our own. Let’s not be ashamed of that, but rather acknowledge it, and keep repeating the message we need to claim, however falteringly. We may have said it yesterday, but we still need to hear it today, and for as long as it takes:

‘Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me. Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Saviour and my God.’ Amen, and amen.