

Sermon Given by

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At the Evening Service on 16th May 2010

Psalm 9 - "Wrestling faith"

Before we look at Psalm 9 in particular, a few words on the Psalms in general. It's been said that the book of Psalms is a cardiograph of one's spiritual state – so the more we feel at home in the Psalms which express all the different feelings of a believer, the better the indication of how we are doing spiritually. And it's certainly true that the more we go on in the Xn life, and experience more of life with its emotional ups and downs and its spiritual highs and lows, the more we will appreciate the psalms and find great comfort in them as they help us to express what we're feeling because in the psalms we find the whole gamut of human emotions expressed: sorrow and joy, hatred and love, exhilaration and depression – they are all brought before the Creator God who made us in His image.

The psalms are up front emotionally, they bare the human soul, which is almost embarrassing at times for the most English amongst us. They are Scripture's songbook and two of our songs tonight have come from the psalms as did our confession. The psalms help us to speak to God in prayer and song. It's also important to say that the psalms can be read on another deeper level. So it's more obvious in some psalms than others but in many of them or at least in many parts of many of them it's right to read them in their fullest sense as the words of Christ.

The inscription above Psalm 9 "To the tune of 'The Death of the Son'" immediately triggers Messianic thoughts and I have worked hard at understanding it as the words of Christ but whilst I do think that at certain points we can see Christ speaking here, primarily we're going to look at this psalm from the perspective of these being the words of the godly believer crying out to God in praise and petition. I'm happy to admit that I've found it quite a hard psalm to understand and it's worth saying to the more linear and logical thinkers that the psalms are of course poems and if you try to look at them too logically, you are in grave danger of paralysis by analysis. Yes, we should work hard at understanding their structure and how they fit together – the commentaries are helpful at that but we also need to let the poetry sweep over us. With that counter in place we are though going to approach this psalm by thinking about the ideas that King David was getting excited about. It's hard to boil these down but it does seem for starters that he has...

An attitude of gratitude – sorry it's a bit of a corny heading but I think it's fitting. V1-2: ***"I will praise you, O Lord, with all my heart; I will tell of all your wonders. I will be glad and rejoice in you; I will sing praise to your name, O most High."*** When David says this he's not waiting for a mood, a feeling of thankfulness and gratitude to come upon him, nor is he trying to generate one, no this is a statement of the will, a statement of intent most likely in spite of how he feels. V13 shows that he's not in an easy, comfortable situation. He's in a tough spot, in fact if you look at v13 it's a fairly major understatement to say that he's in a tough spot! He's in a seriously bad situation – a life and death situation and yet he's bracing himself and he's saying, I will give thanks. Gratitude doesn't come naturally to us in our relationship with God. We take his gifts for granted and often we only really notice when they are withdrawn from us – things like our health, our work, our possessions, our nearest and dearest, our life. That's why we can grow spiritually through times of loss because we learn to appreciate what we do have or what we did have.

I think of a friend of mine at university who had ME for 2 years – for 2 years he could only walk for about 10-15 minutes a day – any more and he'd be exhausted. I remember how he told me that through his illness he learnt to give thanks for all the years prior to getting ME that God had given him a healthy body and for all the sports and exercise and fun things he had once been able to do. We're not naturally thankful. We naturally think of things like good health as our right. As I've said it's clear from v13 that David was in a tough situation. And the temptation when we're in a tough spot, no matter what it may be, is for that issue to so press in on us and dominate us so that we no longer praise and thank God for the many blessings he showers upon us. David doesn't let the pressing troubling issue dominate him.

V1-2: ***"I will praise you, O Lord, with all my heart; I will tell of all your wonders. I will be glad and rejoice in you; I will sing praise to your name, O most High."*** We quickly forget how generous God has been to us – all his material provision and how he has blessed us in every spiritual way through Christ. It's a good habit in the Christian life to count our blessings – to name them one by one. It will take our mind off the immediate outward circumstances of v13 and lift our minds to God – to who He is and what He's done and what He is doing and what He will do. So in the stress of exams, don't let them take over – work hard, pray about them – ask for God's help but make sure that's not all you pray about. Put them in perspective. For someone else the v13 situation of pressure and stress will simply be that life is just so hectic and you never feel that you can do all the things you need to do. Things always have to be cut in the busyness of life at times but make sure that it isn't your gratitude to God. I think of a time I was unemployed for 2 months about 8 years ago. It was a stressful time; I was renting a flat in central London and my savings were beginning to run out. It would have been very easy for that worry to have dominated my thinking and my praying and for gratitude and praise to have been kicked into touch and I can recall thinking how that was beginning to happen. I found it so helpful then to count my many blessings – to lift my eyes from the pressing issue (unemployment) to the God who was sovereign over it and who works through all things for the good of those who love Him and to give Him thanks for his provision in so many other ways; a loving church family, a godly flatmate who was a great encouragement to me, my health, food on the table, my savings, the 2hrs of paid work I did have at that time doing some reading for a blind couple, let alone all the blessings I had in Christ.

Did you notice how David's praise in those opening verses like in all the praise in the psalms is not vacuous and content less, no his praise was based on things – he had strong grounds for his thanksgiving. It was based on God's actions v1b ***"I will tell of all your wonders."*** And it was based on God's character v2 ***"I will be glad and rejoice in you; I will sing praise to your name, O most High."*** To reveal your name in Hebrew culture meant to reveal your whole character; your whole person - your name said a lot about you. All the more so for God. See this in v10 ***"Those who know your name will trust in you, for you, Lord, have never forsaken those who seek you."*** And so David's gratitude; his response to God, even in a tough spot, ought to be our response to God. Later on we'll be sharing the Lord's Supper and that I trust will further help us to put aside for a time those things, those worries and concerns that so easily press in on us and dominate us and instead to meditate on what God has done for us through the Cross. We're to cultivate like David an attitude of gratitude and as we do so it will transform our lives. We live distinctively as Christians due to the gratitude in our hearts, due to the grace of God that has saved us. An attitude of gratitude – David gave thanks to the Lord with his whole heart. ***"I will praise you, O Lord, with all my heart; I will tell of all your wonders. I will be glad and rejoice in you; I will sing praise to your name, O most High."***

So the first inspiration in David's heart is an attitude of gratitude. His second inspiration is...

A certainty about right and wrong

Read v3-6. We've seen how v1-2 fit with v13 but how does this next section of the psalm fit with v13. V13 shows he's in a tough spot in the present and yet these verses speak of his enemies having been dealt with decisively by God. So what's going on? I think what we have here is David describing coming events as if they have already happened, so certain is their fulfilment. And notice the personal way that David speaks of God's victory here. V5 ***"You have rebuked the nations and destroyed the wicked; you have blotted out their name for ever and ever. Endless ruin has overtaken the enemy, you have uprooted their cities; even the memory of them has perished."*** We would find it much more comfortable if the Bible spoke of God overthrowing impersonal forces of evil; some sort of impersonal triumph of good over evil like in the Star Wars films, rather than the language here of Him overthrowing people and nations as it also does in v15-16. But the problem with the world is not some impersonal force of nature, no the problem with the world is its rebellion against God and you can't have a rebellion except through rebels. To put down a rebellion you have to overthrow rebels. Evil is not some impersonal force; evil exists because we all naturally have hearts that rebel against the God who made us. You see the syringe used by the heroine addict is not morally inferior to the syringe used to inject a life-saving antibiotic. The bricks and mortar of a church building are in no way morally better than the bricks and mortar of a brothel – it's the human usage that makes the difference and if God is going to judge evil then He must judge people.

David's view of the world (as he is confronted by God's enemies v13) is that judgement was certain. Those who defied God and His people would v3 stumble and perish before God. Evil will be dealt with. Justice will be done and will be seen to be done. There's a tension in the psalm though because David's certainty about judgement in the present and final judgement in the future springs out of his belief in a God who is both an eternal and a temporal God and that is the third inspiration that lies behind Psalm 9...

A God in eternity and in time

V7 ***"The Lord reigns for ever; he has established his throne for judgement. He will judge the world in righteousness; he will govern the peoples with justice."*** David saw God outside time, triumphant and eternal v7 ***"The Lord reigns for ever..."*** We live in what is often a confusing world, a world of constant change and flux; it's true in our lives and the lives of those around us, it's true of the environment in which we live but praise God that there is a God in eternity, v7 ***"The Lord reigns for ever..."*** But the God in eternity is also wonderfully the God in time. V9 ***"The Lord is a refuge for the oppressed, a stronghold in times of trouble. Those who know your name will trust in you, for you, Lord, have never forsaken those who seek you."*** God is active in history, in the Bible times and in our times, in our lives, which you and I can tell each other about. When we look at God in eternity we see v8 that he settles accounts but here on earth in the present, today, he keeps accounts. V12 ***"For he who avenges blood remembers; he does not ignore the cry of the afflicted."*** V18 ***"But the needy will not always be forgotten, nor the hope of the afflicted ever perish."*** If there's an ultimate celestial triumph there's also a ceaseless terrestrial vigilance – nothing escapes God's eye. There's nothing of which God isn't aware; there's not one detail of our lives that is too petty for him to notice. Did you spot the contrast in v17-18 ***"The wicked return to the grave, all the nations that forget God. But the needy will not always be forgotten, nor the hope of the afflicted ever perish."***

The basic act of human rebellion is to do as the nations are described as doing in v17 – to forget God and we so easily do that but God v18 does not forget us. It's extraordinary isn't; God hasn't forgotten us for one second of our lives and yet we so readily forget Him. It's very humbling and we're challenged by Psalm 9 to hang on to the God who is forever, outside and beyond time – the eternal God who is also active in time, active in our lives, who remembers us.

Well my time is up but I did want to end by sharing with you one way to read these words as the words of the Lord Jesus as he mediates on his death – The death of the Son - that title for the psalm can't be a fluke and I think that v13-16 most easily point us to the cross. So as he looks ahead to the Cross the Son cries out to the Father: **“O Lord, see how my enemies persecute me! Have mercy and lift me up from the gates of death.”** The Son of God knows better than anyone what it is to be persecuted. The whole human race is against Him and he knows in his own life and death what it is to suffer violence and injustice at the hands of bloodthirsty and evil men. There's no bitterness though at what lies ahead. He trusts the Father. He knows He'll be persecuted to death but he looks for vindication, so that v14 **“I may declare your praises”**.

What the Son is doing here is he's doing Hebrews 12:2 – the Son **“who for the joy set before him endured the Cross, scorning its shame...”** In other words he's preparing himself for the Cross. He knows that he would be overcome by sorrow and could never overcome such persecution unless he was fixed on the joys of the new creation and what the Cross would achieve. And he also has confidence from this perspective because he knows that the persecution from his enemies will v15-16 actually destroy them. Even as they scheme against Him, their plans are in actual fact going to trap themselves.

The wisdom and justice of God is such that he sees to it that the wicked get caught in their own traps. The devil thought he had won a great victory over God but as we know it was at the Cross that Christ conquered Satan, it's through the Cross that the captives are led free, it's through the Cross that we are able to say with the apostle Paul, **“where O death is your victory? Where O death is your sting.”** That's how wise and powerful the Father is. At the very centre of the universe there is immovable, merciful, uncompromised and gracious justice and righteousness, centred on the Cross of Christ.

Audio versions of the sermons can be freely downloaded from the All Saints Little Shelford website, <http://www.allsaintslittleshelford.org>. These are available in two formats, mp3 and wma.

(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)