

Sermon Given by

Tony Heywood

At the 9am Service on 20th June 2010

“Transformation by prayer”

I reckon that if you did a survey and asked people what or who they thought of when they heard the name of King David, most people (and certainly the boys!) would go for Goliath. We think of David as that young man, courageously confronting the whole Philistine Army and shouting: “Who is this uncircumcised Philistine that he should defy the armies of the living God.” They’re great words and this is the David that we long to be – on top of a spiritual mountain, that dizzying experience as, by God’s grace, God’s enemy was defeated in that spectacular way. And yet if the story of Goliath was a spiritual high, David has come crashingly low by the time we reach Psalm 13. Once he’d stood over his enemy but now end of v2 he’s crying out in despair: **“How long will my enemy triumph over me?”** As we read Psalm 13 it’s almost like picking up someone’s private diary and reading about their innermost thoughts and feelings. We have that slight sense of: “I can’t believe I’m being able to hear such a personal prayer!” And can you see that Psalm 13 like Psalms 11 and 12 that we’ve looked at the last 2 weeks is “for the director of music.” David wrote down this incredibly frank and personal prayer, handed it to the director of music, the equivalent of David Adams, in the temple in Jerusalem and presumably said something along the lines of: “Can you put this to music because we’re going to sing this together – it’s to be part of our corporate worship.” David does so, I guess, because he felt sure that his experience would resonate with the experience of believers then and now. He shared his experience because he felt that other believers would benefit from it. And the reality is that all true believers will occasionally feel at least a little bit like David does in Psalm 13 and when those times come this psalm will be a road map for us; showing us the way to go and how to get out. So what do we learn from this most personal and frank of Psalms. I’ve highlighted 3 main things.

1st thing to learn is that: **The life of faith walks down dark valleys as well as climbing high mountains** David is described in Scripture as a man after God’s heart and it’s important we see that just as much in the low of Psalm 13 as in his many highs. Like in Psalms 11 & 12 we don’t know what his specific situation was but we do know that it was very tough and that it was a long term problem because we see in v1-2 the same question, or at least the same beginning of a question asked 4 times. V1: **“How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and every day have sorrow in my heart? How long will my enemy triumph over me?”** It doesn’t seem so much to have been the intensity of what David was experiencing but the duration – “This just doesn’t stop, how long will this go on for Lord? I can’t hang on much longer.” He seems exhausted and as he writes the strain is showing. The outward problem was v2b that his enemy was triumphing over him. Perhaps this was Saul or Absalom or the Philistine Army; we’re not sure but that was the pressing issue and the relentless ongoing nature of this caused David spiritual, mental and physical turmoil.

We see the spiritual turmoil in v1 as it feels to David as if God has abandoned him. **“How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?”** Because God hadn’t intervened it felt like God wasn’t there. So he was in spiritual anguish and we see v2 that because the problems he faced remained he was in mental distress too, he showed clear signs of depression: **“How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and every day have sorrow in my heart?”** His outward struggles turned him to look inwards; to worry and to churn his concerns over and over. He’s in spiritual and mental turmoil and if you look on to v3-4 it seems he’s in real physical danger too. **“If this keeps going,” thinks David, “Lord if you don’t intervene soon, I’m going to be dead – my enemy will be victorious.”** It does seem that bleak doesn’t it? That’s why he cries out v3: **“Look on me and answer, O Lord my God. Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death; my enemy will say, “I have overcome him,” and my foes will rejoice when I fall.”** So David, the man after God’s own heart was in this deep dark valley of despair. And at times we will be in dark places too. For many Christians around the world they, like David, will have a real physical enemy hounding them and wearing them down and they’ll cry out: “How long O Lord?” as they endure constant persecution.

Just this last week I read in my Barnabas Fund prayer diary how on 24th January police in Uzbekistan raided a prayer meeting at the home of a church leader called Midet. He and two women were taken to the police station where they were all beaten and required to write statements about their Christian activities. Threatened with being stripped and tortured with electric shocks, one of the women admitted she had been at a prayer meeting. They were all sentenced and given huge fines. The court also ruled that Bibles and Gospels found in Midet’s home should be burned. Or how about the situation for Christians in Afghanistan? I had an email on Friday. It said, I quote, that: “within Afghanistan a dramatic anti-Christian furore has erupted, in which Afghan media and politicians alike are calling for the death of converts from Islam, in line with Islamic sharia law.” Such is the lot for many Christians today and I take it that Psalm 13 is a Bible passage they often turn to as they cry out to God: **“How long, O Lord? How long will my enemy triumph over me?”**

We may not have a physical enemy harassing us like them but that doesn’t mean that we’re without trials and troubles – it doesn’t mean that life as a Christian in Britain today is easy. The life of faith has many enemies to contend with: as we saw last week in Psalm 12 we’re up against a godless and hostile world where lies abound. This side of heaven we’ll always have sin dwelling in our hearts. I think that for me I have most often cried out to God: “How long O Lord?” when I’ve been painfully aware of my sin and it has distressed me and I’ve despaired that I’ll ever change. We’re also up against a powerful spiritual foe – the devil and some times we’ll be very aware of his relentless attacks. In this fallen world we also contend with illness and disease and that final enemy, death. All of which can make us wonder, when we’re suffering under them, if we can persevere. Occasionally they push us to the limit and make us cry out: “How long O Lord?” Of course, God could deal with all the trials and opposition we face in an instant – He is the all powerful Lord of Hosts, nothing is too hard for Him but it pleases him at times not to do that. He may want to make us cast ourselves upon Him – to cry out to Him from our hearts, proving to us again his all-sufficiency and to expose our pride and self-sufficiency. He may want to humble us for some other particular sin that only the felt sense of the removal of his presence will reveal.

God may want us to loosen our grip on this world and on all the things of this world. He may want to teach us that health is a gift not a right. He may want us to grow in our longing for heaven and the blessings that await us there. In God's great and unfathomable wisdom, it pleases Him to take from time to time, even the finest of his saints to the darkest of valleys. So if you sometimes feel far from God, Psalm 13 encourages us that a sense of desertion by God can be a normal part of the Christian life. The key thing is how we respond to these dark valleys and David models that to us which brings us to our second thing to learn...

The importance of open and honest prayer

It's a very obvious point but worth highlighting that rather than letting his demoralising experience drive him from the Lord instead David lets it drive him to the Lord in prayer. In my preparation for this sermon, I came upon one rather neat and fancy way of looking at it under 3 headings all beginning with the same letter: Frustration, Fear and Faith. So frustration we see in v1-2, then fear v3-4 and finally faith v5-6. I like that and it works in many ways but the problem is that faith isn't just in the final couple of verses. In the midst of his troubles David keeps speaking to God. He doesn't wait till things get better till he speaks to God. He prays with raw honesty in his agony. A large part of his prayer is bordering on complaint but that too is a sign of faith. He knew that God is big enough to hear his complaint – He can cope with it. And it was as he prayed that light and hope began to pierce through the darkness. Can you see that v5: ***“But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation. I will sing to the Lord, for he has been good to me.”*** Prayer is one of God's means of grace by which he blesses his children. That's why J.C. Ryle spoke of the blessedness of cultivating holy habits like prayer. It's a vital weapon in spiritual warfare and Satan will do his hellish uttermost to keep us from it. Do you remember that little ditty – I think it's in an old chorus: “Satan trembles when he sees, the weakest saint upon his knees.” It's a little ditty but it's also profound theology. Why? Because the weakest saint in prayer is laying hold of an omnipotent, glorious, sovereign God. So the question, the challenge for us is this: Am I cultivating prayer as a holy habit – by myself, with my spouse, and then are we open and honest in prayer as David was? Do I lay my frustrations before God? Do I pour out my heart to God? For we learn from David that it's only as we confront the frustrations we feel in this life and bring them before God in prayer that we can begin to come to terms with them as God brings His perspective to bear. By the time David had finished praying, grace was given to him. There's a huge transformation in the psalm as we go from v1 to v5-6. By the end he was singing not sighing. And yet there's no indication in the psalm to suggest that anything about David's situation has changed. But clearly David himself has changed. Those feelings of loneliness and isolation from God and despair have gone and been replaced by a new found confidence and joy in God. That possibility of change through prayer is as important for us to see as David's candour and openness with God. And it's an amazing thing that even in the darkest of valleys, the bleakest of scenarios, Christians can know great joy and peace as they trust in God and rest in His promises. In the summer of 1851 the lifeless body of the English missionary Alan Gardner, was found by a search party. He and his companions had been ship-wrecked on a remote, uninhabited island off the coast of S. America. Their provisions eventually ran out and death came slowly but inevitably to each of

them. Alan Gardner was the last to die; we know this and some of his thoughts at that time from his diary that was found with him. He was at one point desperate for water – his pangs of thirst were, he wrote, almost intolerable. Far from home and loved ones, he died alone and isolated; and yet Alan Gardner, despite the wretched conditions in which he died did seem to have experienced a new and deeper sense of the goodness of God even in that very dark valley. He wrote out Bible passages in his journal and one of them was Psalm 34:10 “the young lions may grow weak and hungry but those who seek the Lord lack no good thing.” And in his weakness he penned his last entry in feeble handwriting – he wrote: “I am overwhelmed with the sense of the goodness of God.” Even in those terrible circumstances, he rested and rejoiced in God’s promises. He trusted God’s word and knew God’s smile upon him. He lived by faith, the faith of Psalm 13. He saw no change to his circumstances and yet v5, he trusted in God’s unfailing love and was overwhelmed by God’s goodness.

I gather that when you’re learning to fly of course you learn about all the controls in the cockpit and how they work but you navigate to start with by sight. So you never fly above a certain height and you certainly don’t fly in the clouds because you must see your course. As you progress though and become more qualified you learn to fly higher and in the clouds and at that point in the training you’re taught to trust completely in the controls and what they are telling you. And for the Christian in this life sometimes what we see all around us, in our own circumstances will make us depressed and full of worry and it’s at this point we need to join with Alan Gardner & King David in not looking to our circumstances but trusting his words, trusting his glorious promises, living by faith. V5 **“But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation. I will sing to the Lord, for he has been good to me.”** So we’ve seen how the life of faith involves walking in dark valleys as well as climbing high mountains. We’ve seen the power and importance of prayer. David was transformed, as he prayed, from a man of sighs to a man of song. Lastly and as we turn in the service towards the Lord’s table I want us to consider how this Psalm points us towards King Jesus, great David’s greater Son. We, like David, may feel isolated from God; it might seem as if He has, v1, hid his face from us. That’s at times how it may feel but there’s a big difference between feeling God-forsaken and actually being God-forsaken. The isolation from God that King David feels in Psalm 13:1 prefigures the real spiritual isolation that King Jesus experienced on the Cross. As darkness came over the whole land at the sixth hour the Lord Jesus cried out from the depth of his heart: **“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”** “How long, O Lord?” Jesus could have cried, “How long will you hide your face from me?” “As long as it will take to load on you the sin of your people, as long as it will take to drink the cup of my burning wrath.” That’d be the answer. On the Cross, God the Father hid His face from His Son so that he might look on sinners like us as his dearly beloved children. Christ had to experience true spiritual desolation that we might know God’s smile. He was cut off that we might be brought near.

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.)