

A hymn that sticks in my mind very often, maybe because it challenges me greatly is this one

What a friend we have in Jesus,
all our sins and griefs to bear!
What a privilege to carry
everything to God in prayer!

Have we trials and temptations?
Is there trouble anywhere?
We should never be discouraged;
take it to the Lord in prayer!

And those are such important words – we all have trials, we all have temptations, there's trouble everywhere we look nowadays, so why on earth would we try to deal with all of this on our own. No, we should take it to the Lord in prayer. And I think Jesus said it so powerfully – Come to me all who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. You notice that – Jesus says to come to him. There's got to be a willingness in our hearts to remove the barriers, to take down the defences, and come to him, frequently.

Would it be wrong of me therefore to ask this – what happens when you come to Jesus, but you don't feel like it makes the difference that you were hoping for? Now I don't mean that to be in any way irreverent; I'm simply trying to give a sense of where our psalm tonight is sitting.

Asaph says that he cries out in despair to the Lord for help, and yet he says he will not be comforted. Asaph is being so transparent and honest in how he is feeling. And probably for that reason we can relate to it in our own lives.

Now we all have bad days don't we, but Asaph's groaning isn't coming from having just one bad day at the office, or he's unfortunately got a flat tyre. No this is causing Asaph much grief – his emotions respond in tears verse 1, it affects his sleeping pattern at night verse 2, it affects his mental health and outlook verse 3, it affects him physically verse 4.

So immediately we are able to put ourselves maybe in a similar position from the past where we were affected in a similar way – maybe it was or it is a health scare, maybe it's an issue of mounting debt, maybe it was the raw pain of grief overwhelming you. Whatever it is for us, and whatever it was for Asaph, we can understand how such despair can grip a person's entire life.

And so the natural response is – where are you God? Asaph is beginning with the same questions – he begins in a very bad place. But then halfway through something happens and his gaze turns towards God who he knows is there.

Folks, I know tonight that for some of you, you know exactly what I mean because you're living it right now, and for some of you, you fear a point in life when something traumatic will come, and therefore how to respond.

So whatever the situations is, I want to show you 3 practical things about the Christian life that we can learn tonight from Asaph's psalm.

Firstly, I want us to recognise that the Christian life contains lows that are full of doubt.

We have to be real about that feeling of doubting that creeps in. In fact you can't escape it with the first 9 verses tonight. Asaph is doubting God's compassion, and there's so much turmoil in his soul that he is confused and disturbed with God. I know we can relate to that – wondering about God's reliability, thinking that maybe God's kindness has shifted, this man is in trouble. And from his trouble, he asks 6 rhetorical questions :

He asks

- Will the Lord reject forever?
- Will he never show his favour again?
- Has his unfailing love vanished forever?
- Has his promise failed for all time?
- Has God forgotten to be merciful?
- Has he in anger withheld his compassion?

And the obvious answer to these questions is no. God hasn't abandoned us. But I think it's really important that the questions are asked. The questions must be asked, because only by asking it can the person discover a God who is compassionate and walks **with** us, not away **from** us. Here's what the great Spurgeon said about these verses – *“If you are a child of God, yet never had to ask these questions, you ought to be very grateful; but if you have to ask them, be very thankful that Asaph asked them before you; and believe that, as he had a comfortable answer to them, so shall you. It is always a comfort when you can see the footprints of another man in the mire and the slough, for if that man passed through unharmed, so may you, for his God shall also be your Helper.”*

In asking these questions, Asaph is able to get some clarity. And for each of us, we are always better bringing questions to God. Because doubts are better expressed into speech rather than letting them fester in our hearts. When our thoughts are articulated, they can be dealt with. This is a man who is in despair, he's depressed, and here he is wrestling with all these issues.

Whatever it is that we might face, let's ask God the honest questions. It shows that desire to have a relationship with him who has a plan to prosper you and to give you a hope.

Now thankfully the sermon doesn't end here – there's good news coming, because something miraculous happens in verses 10 – 12, but before we look at it further, we need to see the change that happens to this man's life before we consider what was his strategy for moving out of that place of despair.

And this brings me to the 2nd practical thing about living as a Christian. And that is along with feeling these moments of doubt,

there will be those faith filled highs.

We see such a dramatic shift in verses 13 – 20. When we have those times when they feel difficult, we remember that God is powerful, he is faithful, and when we feel alone we know he is compassionate and he is near to his people.

Ironically for Asaph, the same voice that asks 6 rhetorical questions of God, goes on to say these things. It's not that we are reading another psalm, or reading from another book of the bible. It's just a few verses away from those previous feelings of doubt, and now what

rises up in Asaph is this proclamation of faith. Asaph remembers a number of things about God.

He remembers verse 13 that God is holy. Whatever God has done is upright and true. God has always done the right thing and he will always do the right thing. And even though Asaph's mind is not in the right place, he recalls the character of God and that helps him where he is at. He also notices that God is great – Asaph is remembering back to the Exodus – he's remembering when God fought like a warrior to rescue his people from spiritual and political captivity in Egypt. And Asaph remembers these things, and in doing so it's helping his heart. What a change – here in verse 13 he asks a rhetorical question, and yet several verses back he asks 6 questions wondering if God was even good. And now he's asking 'What god is as great as our God?'. He's changed – he's on a journey. Verse 14 God performs miracles and displays power. All these sentences look so different to the earlier verses. In fact if you have your bibles open you will actually see how different they are – they move from the opening 6 verses which are all about 'I' and 'me' and now from verses 13 onwards the writer is focusing on 'You' and 'Lord'.

A bit like the contrast in the reading, when we look at our circumstances, we tend to focus on ourselves and we see no hope. And we are asking the question – God where are you. We are looking at ourselves instead of looking at God. But when we look by faith to the Lord Jesus, our circumstances may not change, but what does change is ourselves. And so Asaph moves out of that place of doubt, and into a dependency and devotion to God.

The reality is that we are going to have days or maybe even seasons of doubt at different stages of our lives, but that's why it's so important to look at the faithfulness and character of God when we look upon our circumstances. Remember his goodness, remember his power to do more than we will ever imagine. Folks whatever it might be that you are going through right now, or maybe what you are going through as a Church, or what we might be going through as a wider Church of Ireland, if those are periods of doubt in wondering what is happening, and asking all the questions, remember that God has a way. There will always inevitably be good news where God is in the centre of something.

Just think about it – Asaph had the history of the Exodus to look back on to see God's faithfulness. And how much more do we have today – we are able to look at all this in the light of the New Testament, the hope that overflows from the Gospel. We can rejoice in Jesus' redemption through the cross and resurrection. Will God who redeemed you by the blood of Jesus, leave you as an orphan when you are in need? Of course not.

So Asaph moves from a position of despair to a place of hope. But that's because only God can lead his people through tough times. But how can Asaph have got himself from that place of desolation and come to that place of confidence? How can he get from a place of despair verses 1-9 through to a place of trust in verse 13-20, and how can we be that kind of people, especially when we face circumstances and we think it's just such a mess? Well the answer is the third aspect to the Christian life, and that is

To remember the work of our redeemer.

In verse 10-12 Asaph states these remarkable words

“Then I thought, “To this I will appeal:
the years when the Most High stretched out his right hand.

¹¹ I will remember the deeds of the Lord;

yes, I will remember your miracles of long ago.
¹² I will consider all your works
and meditate on all your mighty deeds.”

I don't know whether it's in your bibles or not, but after verse 9 and before verse 10 there should be a little word called 'Selah', and roughly translated Selah is a pause or a meditation to stop and just think about one's own situation before God. And that's what's happened. Asaph has been talking continually to God about himself. But he has got to stop, to pause, to reflect, and then consider what next to do. He doesn't walk away from talking to God. The dialogue is still open, but he needs to take a moment to reflect on whether his approach is appropriate before the Lord of all Lords.

And so things begin to shift. Asaph in verse 11, and similarly we today, need to focus our thoughts on what God's word says over us, rather than what a situation or circumstance tries to flood us with. Asaph depends on the word of God. And the call is the same for us today - for us to be comforted daily by the word of God. It's a life lived on the word of God and not our circumstances. Asaph didn't in his distress say "I will try to make time this week to remember your promises Lord", or "I might remember". No, he said "I WILL remember". It was a determined choice.

Asaph is choosing to lean into God. He says "I WILL remember, I will meditate, I will think about all the deeds of the Lord that are in scripture". He looks at what God has done in the past, which gives him an anchor for his present, and a hope for his future.

So when in despair, do we choose like the hymn writer to bring it to the Lord in prayer? Or do we become so suffocated by the circumstance around us. Do we turn to the word of God so that we can soar through the stormy clouds and declare like Asaph, "You are a God who performs miracles, What god is as great as our God?" Recall that cross at calvary and what took place there – remember the deeds of the Lord. Allow your soul to be encouraged by what Jesus has done for you. We have the God who intervenes, who sustains, who rescues and who saves. Let's cast all our cares on him. Yes we will have doubts, but let's never forget his faithfulness, and let's shift from people of despair to people of hope. Amen.