

Sermon Series:

GREEN LEAF IN DROUGHT-TIME

God's sustaining grace in times of trouble



Sunday morning service – 25/07/2021

CALL TO WORSHIP: Psalm 84

- ¹ *How lovely is your dwelling place, O LORD of hosts!*
² *My soul longs, yes, faints for the courts of the LORD;
my heart and flesh sing for joy to the living God.*
³ *Even the sparrow finds a home, and the swallow a nest for herself,
where she may lay her young, at your altars, O LORD of hosts, my King and my God.*
⁴ *Blessed are those who dwell in your house, ever singing your praise! Selah*
- ⁸ *O LORD God of hosts, hear my prayer; give ear, O God of Jacob! Selah*
⁹ *Behold our shield, O God; look on the face of your anointed*
¹⁰ *For a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere.
I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God
than dwell in the tents of wickedness.*
¹¹ *For the LORD God is a sun and shield; the LORD bestows favour and honour.
No good thing does he withhold from those who walk uprightly.*
¹² *O LORD of hosts, blessed is the one who trusts in you!*

SONG: Behold Our God

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gqrli3Lkf58>

PASTORAL PRAYER (Becky Douglass)

“O LORD God of hosts, hear my prayer; give ear, O God of Jacob!”

As your people prayed long ago, so we come before you today with our prayers. Thank you for always being there and always listening. Thank you that you are all knowing and all powerful. Nothing is too big or too small for your care. We are your people and we trust in you.

We pray for our city, our state and our nation as the COVID virus causes so much disruption, pain, and hardship. We pray for those who are frontline workers in the fight against the spread of COVID – the contact tracers, COVID testers and vaccinators, medical staff, and

response coordinators. We pray for those who are working hard to keep essential services available and provide care for those unwell and with extra needs. May those directing the response be given your wisdom and insight so that they make good decisions. And may we be willing to work together for the good of all of us. We pray for your peace to bring calm and comfort in this anxious time.

We pray especially for those in our congregation who are working during this difficult time. Some are having to work out new ways to work at home while others are still working in the community. We pray for Your strength and peace of mind as COVID adds extra stress and uncertainty. Please remind us to be praying for them and encouraging them.

We also pray for our ministry partners. Thank you that Colin and Jill are continuing to prepare to leave for Spain at the end of the month. We pray that you will provide for their needs during this time of transition. We also pray that you will guide Caleb as to how to pastor his church in Uganda during the pandemic and for Grace as she begins her new role in providing support for refugee women. Thank you that the Newby's continue to recover from COVID. We think especially of their children as they settle into new schooling arrangements. Please provide for all their needs.

We pray for Gaby and Kit as they find new ways to connect with their students at East Hills Girls High and Western Sydney University. May they know how best to provide support and encouragement during this difficult time. We also think of the Scripture students at Panania North Public School who are not able to have classes at the moment. You know their situations and needs. Please keep them safe and bring people across their path who are able to point them to you.

Finally, we know that several of our people are dealing with various health issues. We thank you that Betty's eye is doing better and we pray for continued healing. We pray that Kusan will have a helpful visit with the specialist on Wednesday and find some relief from her very painful legs. We pray that Robyne's surgery will go well on Monday and that she will recover well. We also remember others who have on-going issues - Jhansi's brother who has COVID; Karen recovering from blood clots in her lungs; those dealing with cancer - Jenny Edwards (Bill & Brenda's daughter-in-law), Liz Martin (Lorraine's daughter-in-law) Margaret Carey, Jeanette Harrington; and others not well - Bill & Brenda, Ian Chapman, Harry and Betty. We pray that you would strengthen their bodies and bring peace to their hearts and minds.

God, we thank you that you care for us and want us to come to you with our requests. May we find rest in your care.

For the LORD God is a sun and shield; the LORD bestows favour and honour.

No good thing does he withhold from those who walk uprightly.

O LORD of hosts, blessed is the one who trusts in you!

We pray together as you taught us:

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name,

Your kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us today our daily bread.

Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.

Save us in the time of trial and deliver us from evil.

For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours now and forever.

Amen.

SONG: Unchanging

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hjvj29793Kg>

BIBLE READING

Jeremiah 29:1-14

¹These are the words of the letter that Jeremiah the prophet sent from Jerusalem to the surviving elders of the exiles, and to the priests, the prophets, and all the people, whom Nebuchadnezzar had taken into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. ²This was after King Jeconiah and the queen mother, the eunuchs, the officials of Judah and Jerusalem, the craftsmen, and the metal workers had departed from Jerusalem. ³The letter was sent by the hand of Elasah the son of Shaphan and Gemariah the son of Hilkiah, whom Zedekiah king of Judah sent to Babylon to Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon. It said: ⁴“Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: ⁵Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. ⁶Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. ⁷But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare. ⁸For thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Do not let your prophets and your diviners who are among you deceive you, and do not listen to the dreams that they dream, ⁹for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name; I did not send them, declares the LORD.

¹⁰“For thus says the LORD: When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you, and I will fulfil to you my promise and bring you back to this place. ¹¹For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. ¹²Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. ¹³You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart. ¹⁴I will be found by you, declares the LORD, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, declares the LORD, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.

Rom. 8:28-32, 37-39

And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified. What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

REFLECTION: Hope in God (Becky Douglass)

Video: <https://youtu.be/Z8fmj6JZTHg>

As we continue to look at what can sustain us in difficult times, what keeps our leaves green in drought-time, we now move to the need for hope. Hope is what helps us to lift our eyes from our current situation and see the possibility of change or of a bigger picture which makes some sense of what is happening. Without hope, difficulties can become unbearable. Part of what makes our current situation so difficult is that we can't yet see an end to the lockdown. The numbers haven't really started to go down yet and it is easy to lose hope that things will change and we will move back to a more normal life.

To look at hope this morning, we're going to travel back to the kingdom of Judah again. A couple of weeks ago, we looked at King Hezekiah's prayer when faced with the might of Assyria. God rescued Jerusalem and Hezekiah continued to follow God and ruled the land well. However, after him, the kingdom turned away from God again. God allowed a series of attacks from Assyria, Egypt and Babylon in the following years and sent prophets to warn the people to turn back to God but to no avail. Eventually about a hundred years after Hezekiah, we read in our reading from Jeremiah that the king, his mother and many others were carried away into exile in Babylon.

When this happened, the exiles reacted in despair and anger. Psalm 137 says, "*By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion.*" (Psalm 137:1) This Psalm is one of the few that doesn't include even a glimmer of hope or trust in God. In fact, instead of hope in God, it ends with curses on the Babylonians, which cause us to cringe at their violence. They had no hope, only hate for their oppressors. They didn't acknowledge that their own sin had contributed to their situation and they didn't even ask God for help.

It was then that false prophets came along, claiming that God had told them that He had changed His mind and was going to rescue them from exile. This is what they wanted to hear! They stopped settling into their new lives in Babylon. They put life on hold and got ready to head back to Jerusalem. Maybe this wasn't going to be so bad after all! They had hope again – but it was a false hope.

Jeremiah the prophet was still back in Jerusalem with those who had been left behind. Messages were travelling back and forth between Jerusalem and the exiles and news must have reached him of their belief that the exile was going to end soon. As Jeremiah prayed to God and sought wisdom from Him, he knew that those in Babylon were being led astray – both by their despair and by their hope of a swift return. They were wrong to think that God had abandoned them – He hadn't for a moment. They were also wrong to think that God had changed His mind about them being in exile – He hadn't done that either. Jeremiah sat down to write them a letter – a true message from God. In this letter, God calls them to look to Him and to trust him because He is still their God and He is still working for their good even when it doesn't look that way.

The letter starts out - "*Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon*" (v.4) Right from the beginning, God establishes that He is still in control. They are angry with the Babylonians, but God says that He is the one who has sent them into exile. Their current position is not accidental, not out of control, but a part of His plan for them. But He also assures them that He has no intention of abandoning them there. He promises, "*When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place.*" (v.10) God is firmly in control of their destiny – He has not abandoned them, and He has a plan. And he calls them to trust His plan for them. Instead of agitating to get back to Jerusalem, they are to settle down in their new lives – to build houses and plant gardens, to grow families and to prosper. Because God is in control of their situation, they are even free to stop hating their new neighbours in Babylon and to pray for them and seek to bless them – for then they will

share in the blessing. God is calling them away from fear and anger and into contentment in His will for them.

As I was thinking about their situation I was struck by the fact that they would be in exile for 70 years. This means that it would be their grandchildren or even their great-grandchildren who would be returning to Jerusalem. None of those who went into exile would return. This made me think of the Exodus. Then, the Israelites rebelled and refused to trust God to give them the Promised Land, God made them stay in the wilderness for 40 years until all the adults had died. In a sense, God was purging the Israelites of those who had caused so much trouble and allowing a new generation to take their place – for the nation to have a fresh start. In this situation, the ingrained rebellion against God must have been even worse and it would take a couple of generations to change their attitude towards God. Towards the end of our passage, God says, *“Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart.”* (v.12,13) They would need those 70 years for the heart of the nation to change and to turn back to God. But when they did turn to Him, He would be there waiting for them, ready to bring them home. We saw this change of heart when we looked at Ezra recently in the Grace Groups. There, the people who return admit that they had gone into exile because of their rebellion against God. There is a humility and openness to God that we don’t see when they first go into exile. Far from abandoning them, God was using the exile to help them see their need for Him and to bring them to the point where they were ready to seek Him and call upon Him - to trust Him again.

None of this had taken God by surprise. He had always known that the Israelites would not stay faithful to Him. In Moses’ farewell address to them, he had told them:

“And when (not if!) all these things come upon you, the blessing and the curse, which I have set before you, and you call them to mind among all the nations where the LORD your God has driven you, and return to the LORD your God, you and your children, and obey his voice in all that I command you today, with all your heart and with all your soul, then the LORD your God will restore your fortunes and have mercy on you, and he will gather you again from all the peoples where the LORD your God has scattered you. If your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there the LORD your God will gather you, and from there he will take you. And the LORD your God will bring you into the land that your fathers possessed, that you may possess it. And he will make you more prosperous and numerous than your fathers. And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live.
(Deuteronomy 30:1-6)

They didn’t trust God and so they ended up in exile. But God had promised that it wouldn’t stay that way. Once they turned to Him, He would rescue them and restore them. Why? Because that is God’s character. Remember how He revealed Himself to Moses back at Mt Sinai? He said He was: *“The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness.”* (Exodus 34:6 NIV). He had shown this character as He had given them chance upon chance to repent and turn to Him. And now He was showing this character as He sent them into exile so that they would learn to seek Him and find Him.

It is this context in which we find the verses which we all love to quote from this passage: *“For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.”* (v.11) The exile, as hard as they found it, was for their good. They wouldn’t see that goodness for a while – it would take 70 years and a couple of generations! – but God’s plan was for their welfare and not for evil. But putting them in a place where they would turn back to Him, God was giving them a future and a hope that they would not have known otherwise. The exile was a chance for a new beginning – a new beginning full of hope as they followed God and allowed Him to be their God.

How did those in exile respond to this letter? We're not told. I am sure many rejected it – after all, the message the false prophets gave was so much more comfortable and easier to accept. But I am sure some began to think – to re-evaluate their lives in light of what God said. Maybe they decided to trust Him and so they did indeed settle into their life in Babylon and started to raise their families there. Maybe they sought out more information about God and began to change their ways to follow Him and taught their children to follow Him. And their children passed that belief on to their children and their faith in God grew. And one day, when the Babylonians were overthrown and the Persians came to power, they were ready to return to Jerusalem, to rebuild the temple, and begin a new life as God's people in the Promised Land once again. God never abandoned them. He was always working for their good, even during those 70 years they were in exile.

But how are we to respond to this today? We love to quote Jeremiah 29:11, but what does it mean to us today? Another verse that we love to quote is found in our Romans reading: *“And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.” (Romans 8:28)* It sounds very similar, doesn't it? Both promise us that God is always in control, working out His plans and purposes in our lives. Both call us to trust Him in what ever circumstance we find ourselves. Both assure us that God is seeking our very best in everything because both are based firmly on the character of God Himself – compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in love and faithfulness.

I think that there are a few glorious truths from these verses that we can hang onto to matter what happens to us. (1) God is in control no matter what happens – even when everything seems to be going wrong. (2) As His children, we are surrounded by His love, and nothing can separate us from His love. The end of our Romans passage is a wonderful statement of this. (3) God will never give up on us, even if we turn away from Him. He is faithful even when we are faithless. (4) Our good, our welfare, is always His goal as He works in our lives. These truths about God give us hope in even the most difficult of circumstances.

Within the context of these wonderful truths about God, there are two things that I think we need to remember. Firstly, our good, our welfare, is tied up in our relationship with Him. God knew that as long as the Jews were in rebellion against Him, they would never experience His best for them. Likewise for us, Paul, in Romans, relates our good to the growth of our relationship with God - from being called by Him through being justified in Christ to finally glorified with Him. More than physical prosperity or comfort, God knows our very best is found in our relationship with Him. God never promises that our lives will be easy, but He promises that He will always be with us and will enable us to live well no matter what happens. We'll be talking more about this next week.

Secondly, He will never force Himself on us, but He will work in our lives to draw us into a closer walk with Him. God did not send His people into exile as retribution for their rebellion, but to break the cycle of sin they were in and to make a path for them to come back into a right relationship with Him. Sometimes He allows things to disrupt our lives to get our attention. I don't believe that every time something goes wrong in our lives it is because we have sinned. Many times, bad things happen to us simply because we are living in a world broken by sin. But even in these situations God is still in control and is able to use them to draw us closer to Himself and teach us more about trusting Him.

As we finish, I think it is helpful to jump to the end of the Bible to see God's ultimate plan for us. Because of God's great love for us, we have this sure hope that He will not abandon us, but will bring us one day to be with Him forever when sin and pain and sorrow are no more and nothing can come between us.

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, ... And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away." And he who was seated on the throne said, "Behold, I am making all things new." (Revelation 21:1-5)

PRAYER

Lord, this is a glorious picture of where we're headed – the end which gives us hope for today. As we wait for your return, may we learn to trust you more. To put our faith in your character as compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in love and faithfulness. And may we trust your control in every situation and know that you will do what is best for us and will enable us to handle anything that comes across our path. Life may be difficult but you give us hope. May we trust you and not be afraid. Amen

SONG: Be Still My Soul

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bVLEzpB-Pac>

BENEDICTION: Romans 15:13,33

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. The God of peace be with you all. Amen.