

Sermon 16th August 2020 Psalm 57

Introduction

Many of us will remember the Russian father and daughter Sergei and Yulia Skripal, who were found collapsed on a park bench in Salisbury in 2018, poisoned with the nerve agent Novichok. Sergei was a former double agent, spying for the British against his native Russia. He had previously been imprisoned by the Russians, but was later released in a spy swap, and was told that he had been pardoned by the Kremlin. But Sergei, now living in Britain, told several friends that he feared reprisals and that his life was in danger. And indeed he was attacked with poison. He narrowly escaped with his life, and is now in hiding again. Two Russian agents were heavily implicated, and it's likely that they were operating under the instructions of the Russian Government.

David was also a man in danger of his life from somebody important and powerful, and in Psalm 57 we learn of his fears. If you read the introduction to the Psalm, you can see why he felt so threatened. It says "of David. When he had fled from King Saul into a cave". Although Saul was King of Israel, God had rejected him because of his disobedience, and he knew that his days as king were numbered. David had been secretly anointed as Saul's successor by the prophet Samuel. But he still had to wait to become king.

Meanwhile David was serving at King Saul's court, playing the harp to soothe him when he was being tormented by an evil spirit, and also acting as Saul's armour bearer. David was a valiant warrior— I am sure we all remember the story of David and Goliath, perhaps it's one we learned in Sunday School. After David defeated the giant, he received more acclaim and adulation than King Saul himself. The people used to sing a song "Saul has slain his thousands, and David his tens of thousands".

This made Saul mad with anger and jealousy, and he tried to kill David on numerous occasions. David fled and eventually hid in a cave, with a band of people from the fringes of society. So this was where he was when he wrote this Psalm – isolated, threatened and in fear of his life.

Last week Nigel spoke on Psalm 55, a Psalm of Lament, where the Psalmist cried out to God honestly and openly about his concerns. And Psalm 57 is another such Psalm. Over the summer, many of us have been following our daily Summer Psalms readings. And many of this week's Psalms (57-63), are also laments by David, often from difficult times in his life . (if you've not yet been following the readings, it's well worth doing so, so please ask someone for the yellow leaflet of the readings).

Psalm 57

Lament here means passionately expressing one's feelings, in this case to God. And Psalm 57, I believe, is a journey, an emotional journey, from expressing cries of despair to praise. David starts by crying to God for mercy. He calls on God as his refuge, somewhere to hide until the disaster has passed. He's been on the run for a while, and he's hidden in all sorts of places, and he's still alive. So why look to God as a refuge? Why is God a good refuge, and why would David trust him? And as we read through the Psalm, we'll start to understand why.

The first thing, in verse 2, is that David is confident that God has a plan for him, and God will fulfil that plan. In this translation it says that God will vindicate him. However, in others translate it to mean that God "performs" or "fulfils his purpose" or "completes his plans". This gives us a fuller sense of the meaning. David has been anointed King, and he will live to achieve this.

David is also confident in God's power and the ability to achieve this (v 3). God will even send from heaven to save him, and rebuke the people who seek to harm him, using all his powers.

David is also confident in God's character. In verse 3, he recognises God's love and faithfulness, which he will send to David, (and which he also acknowledges in v 9).

But David doesn't underestimate his enemies, who are very real (v4). They were not just seeking to harm him physically – but to harm him verbally, discrediting and insulting him with their words, and denouncing him to Saul. David's enemies surround him, day and night. Was David really confident that God was strong enough to defeat them?

In the refrain in verse 5, we get our answer. David praises God, in spite of his enemies. He trusts God as Lord over all, and longs for God's to be exalted above the heavens, and for his glory to cover the earth. We don't know how much David understood of God's overall plans for the world, later fulfilled through Jesus Christ, who will one day return to rule in power, but David certainly longs to see God glorified.

And this verse, verse 5, marks a turning point. David is now confident in God. In verse 6, he acknowledges those who are trying to trap him, but he is certain that the attackers will fall, and have already fallen, into their own traps. Nothing has changed outwardly, but David believes that God will defeat his enemies.

And, strengthened in this knowledge, David determines to trust God (v7). His heart will be steadfast. In Hebrew culture, heart wasn't just about emotions, it was about the mind too. And this steadfastness led him to praise. David would praise God in song and music, using his skills on the harp. He won't just praise God in private. He'll praise him in front of others too. He knows he'll be back in society again, telling others about God's love and faithfulness, and all that He has done.

And this leads us to the final verse, which repeats v 5. David longs for God to be exalted over all things. David has moved from anxiety and complaint to praise and confidence in God to fulfil all his purposes for him and for the whole world.

So what does this mean for us?

We know that this Psalm was used in worship long ago, by the Jewish people. In the introduction we see that it was set a tune called "Do not destroy". Although the music is long since lost, this shows us that the Psalm was used in worship. The worshippers were to learn from the Psalm, and so are we.

Refuge The most important **question** we should ask ourselves is "**What is my refuge**". We all need a refuge, because we will all go through difficult times. It's part of the human experience. Like the Psalmist we may face attacks from other people, perhaps difficult work colleagues, neighbours or even family members. But we may face other difficulties too, perhaps unemployment, financial shortages, illness or bereavement. And perhaps during the lockdown, we have felt isolated, as though we are in a cave, like David.

And there are many kinds of refuge – food, shopping, television, work, meetings, relationships, and there are many others. (Chocolate!) None of these are bad in themselves, but we can use them as a hiding place to avoid dealing with our stresses. But God wants us to turn to him as our refuge, like the Psalmist did.

So how can we make God our refuge?

1 Knowing God. The first step is to know God and why he is a good refuge. We know that he's faithful, He has a purpose for our lives, and he has the power to fulfil his plans for us. Even in our difficulties, we know that God has a purpose. In Romans 8:28, St Paul tells us that ²⁸ "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who ^l have been called according to his purpose." And at a wider level he has a plan for our salvation, which he has achieved through the death and resurrection of our saviour Jesus Christ. And nothing can stop that.

[In Romans 8:38, St Paul goes on to tell us that "neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, ^l neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, ³⁹ neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."]

2 Trusting God. We trust things every day – we trust the trains to arrive (which they mostly do), we trust that when the traffic lights are green it's safe to go. We trust them on what we know of them. And so we can trust God, based on what we know of him. In 1 Peter it tells us to "Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you." (1 Pet 5:7) And we can trust our anxieties to God in prayer.

3 Praising God. And so knowing and trusting God, leads us on to praising Him. We need to determine to praise God, even in difficult times, in words and in music too. King David steadfastly determined that he would praise God despite a difficult situation, and so should we. I don't always find it easy to praise God when life has seemed difficult. But I do remember many occasions in the past when found my mood lifted when I have praised God with other believers, or even doing morning prayer. Sadly we can't all sing together in church at the moment, but we can still praise God at home. And we can share with others what God has done for us in our lives.

So let's determine to know God better, to entrust our concerns to him and to praise our loving God, our refuge in difficult times.

Closing Prayer

Lord God, thank you that you are a sure refuge. Please help us to know you better, and to trust you and praise you, even when life is difficult.

In Jesus' name, **Amen**