

LP

Readers' Service

A God of Faithfulness

by

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Number: 7

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ORDER OF SERVICE

(Everything in brackets is additional reference material for the Reader which may not require reading out in the service.)

CALL TO WORSHIP (Lamentations 3:22-26, New RSV.)

The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, his mercies never come to an end.
They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.

"The LORD is my portion," says my soul, "therefore I will hope in him."
The LORD is good to those who wait for him, to the soul that seeks him.

It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD.

HYMN no.511 (H&P) "Sing praise to God who reigns above"

AS PREPARATION FOR PRAYER we read Hebrews 10:15-25.

PRAYER

Almighty and never-changing God, we acknowledge your covenant with us. We affirm that you are a God who stands by his word, whose love is constant, and whose promises cannot fail.

Long ago you spoke of a day when through your Holy Spirit you would inscribe your laws and your truth upon our hearts. And those days are now. Through Jesus Christ you renew your covenant with us and make all things new.

We thank you that you forgive all our sins, that no further sacrifice from us is needed because Jesus died for us and rose again triumphant. In repentance we offer you now our failures and our faults, approaching you in sincerity and faith that we might again be set upon the new and living way that leads to glory.

Even now we thank you for our privilege of addressing you directly, of worshipping you in freedom, and of having this opportunity to encourage one another in fellowship. Having come here, Lord, may we go away changed through your Spirit's work in us. Amen.

HYMN no.686 (H&P) "When our confidence is shaken" (685 would be an alternative)

God is a faithful God, but there are times when our faith in him is tried and tested. This

hymn is about the growth of our faith through such challenges.

READING: Psalm 89

(The sermon requires that this be read in its entirety. To prevent it seeming over-long use one of these methods:

- a: If the church has a copyright licence then the version in "The Dramatised Bible" could be photocopied and the congregation be divided in half to read the parts of Worshipper 1 and Worshipper 2.
- b: If there are pew bibles read alternate verses.
- c: Involve one other person to read the LORD's words (v3-4,19b-37) while you read the rest.)

A psalm about God's faithfulness in time of trouble.

SONG no.89 (Songs of Fellowship, combined 1991) "**Faithful One so unchanging**"
or **HYMN no.474** (H&P) "**Help us, O Lord, to learn**"

SERMON (SEE ATTACHED SHEETS)

PRAYER

O God, at times we are amazed at the faith some people had long before your love was proved on the cross. And we are ashamed at our doubts and questionings of your promises.

Help us to believe not only that your saving grace does not depend on our prior goodness, but that it depends neither on our subsequent performance, that you love us just because you love us.

And teach us also to cling to this total faithfulness of yours even when everything goes wrong, all our efforts are wasted, and everything is taken from us. Help us discover there and then, as we never could discover in comfort and stability, that you are our rock that cannot be shaken. Amen.

HYMN No.66 (H&P) "**Great is thy faithfulness**"

PRAYERS OF INTERCESSION

(Choose one of the four forms of prayer on pages B24-B31 of the Methodist Service Book, adding, if you feel able, current concerns and/or those for the day in the Prayer Handbook at the places where ... appears in the prayers.)

THE LORD'S PRAYER

ANNOUNCEMENTS

OFFERING

PRAYER OF DEDICATION (based on Acts 20:35, REB.)

We remember the words of the Lord Jesus who himself said, "Happiness lies more in giving than in receiving", and we pray Lord that our happiness might abound as we give ourselves continually and faithfully to your service in the world you love. Amen.

HYMN No.62 (H&P) "Captain of Israel's host"
or **SONG No.549 (SoF) "The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases"**

BENEDICTION (1 Thessalonians 5:23,24,28, REB.)

May God himself, the God of peace, make you holy through and through, and keep you sound in spirit, soul and body, free of any fault when our Lord Jesus Christ comes. He who calls you keeps faith; he will do it. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you!

SERMON

Few things have more power to move us than stories of utter faithfulness.

Near the centre of Edinburgh you can see the bronze statuette to Greyfriars Bobby, the little dog who watched by his master's grave, hour after hour, day after day, summer and winter, year by year until he died.

But it is not just from animals that we learn the art of faithfulness, though there are many stories like that.

It is from God. God who can never prove unfaithful because he cannot change.

Sadly we do.
And God knows it.

If we find poignant the stories of faithfulness, so too, for a different reason, the tears are not far from our eyes when we read words such as those of the Lord through Hosea:

"What shall I do with you, O my children,
Your love is like morning mist, like the dew that goes away early."

Because we have been there.
Perhaps we are there now.

And it is not only in regard to God we forget our covenant.
We fail to be what others should expect from us.

Those of us who are married were once asked whether we would remain faithful to our partner as long as we both should live.

And without exception we replied "I will."

A vow easily made at the time, but often broken by subsequent thought or action.

Or take the field of work.

We have lost the days when employer and employee honoured a mutual verbal commitment.
Good faith now needs increasingly complex terms and conditions of employment.

And loopholes in contracts are there to be exploited.

Not just in contracts of employment. But in tax avoidance, trading practice, any area governed by law that you care to name.

Armies of lawyers are pitted against each other trying to sew up loopholes and discover new

ones.

We've created for ourselves a Society based on mistrust.

Faithfulness no longer counts. Promises are worthless.

Yet in all of us there is a yearning.

We want to relate on different terms than those which world dictates.

There is within us that desire to learn faithfulness, to prove faithful. God placed it there, for he is a faithful God.

There is a text in 2 Timothy 2 which is designed to send the heart soaring, because it does not say what you think it should say...

"The saying is sure:

If we have died with him, we will also live with him;
If we endure, we will also reign with him;
If we deny him, he will also deny us;
If we are faithless, he remains faithful - for he cannot deny himself."

"If we are faithless he remains faithful."

Psalm 89, which we are going to look at now, is an even more remarkable tribute to God's faithfulness.

For it is praise of God's faithfulness which comes from the heart of a nation that feels itself to be let down by God.

And if we want to learn to be faithful, this is the place we must learn...
Not where trust is affirmed,
not where faith is rewarded,
not where there is perfect harmony in relationships...

But where our trust is abused,
where our faithfulness to the truth is repulsed,
where our honest dealings are flung back in our faces,
where our reliability is ridiculed,
where a relationship seems to have crumbled entirely...
that is where we must prove faithful.
that is the school where we can learn to be faithful.

It is a psalm in three sections, and the first is:

IN PRAISE OF A FAITHFUL GOD.

The introductory verses make this theme plain.

"I will sing of your steadfast love, O Lord, forever;

With my mouth I will proclaim your faithfulness to all generations.

I declare that your steadfast love is established forever;
your faithfulness is as firm as the heavens."

Understandably you begin to think, "What testimony! What wonderful thing has God done for his people that the leader of the choir, for such is the composer, should so magnify the faithfulness, the dependability of God?"

What wonderful event?
The utter destruction of his holy city!!
Can you believe it?

We shall see in a moment that it is true.

But for the first 18 verses the writer praises the eternal nature of God.
But not in the abstract.
God in relation to us.

And verse 3 says, "I have made a covenant with my chosen one, I have sworn to my servant David, I will establish your descendants forever, and build your throne for all generations."

The historical basis for this special relationship with King David and his nation is in 2 Samuel 7.

There God said to David through Nathan the prophet, "You have secured the kingdom. Your son will build me a temple, and I will establish his throne for ever."

God even said, "When he commits iniquity, I will punish him, with blows inflicted by human beings...But I will not take my steadfast love from him...Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me."

That was the open promise God made.
It was an unconditional covenant.

That is what makes it possible for the psalmist amid the ruins of the temple, the rubble of the royal palace, the captivity of the king and the exile of the people to affirm the faithfulness

of God.

And as you read through verses 5-18, first there is praise of God's majesty with a picture of the angels worshipping him.

There is praise of his rule, his taming of the fearsome waters. And there is praise of his righteousness:

"Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne: steadfast love and faithfulness go before you.

Happy are the people who know the festal shout, who walk, O LORD, in the light of your countenance."

And then from praise of God himself the psalm moves to consider the people of God represented by their king, its theme shifts from God's faithfulness to his covenant promise which is founded upon it.

And the central section of the psalm, verses 19-37, is basically

A REMINDER OF THE PROPHECY

through Nathan.

Deep-written in these verses is the promise of faithfulness.

Verse 24: "my faithfulness and steadfast love will be with him."

Verse 28: "Forever I will keep my steadfast love for him, and my covenant with him will stand firm."

And most remarkably in verses 30-37 words which I'm going to re-read because they are such a perfect commentary on that verse in Timothy, "If we prove faithless he will remain faithful."

Read Psalm 89:30-37

At this point in the psalm the reader stands amazed.

Do we really have a God whose faithfulness to us is not dependant on our faithfulness to him?

I wonder how many of us believe it?

Most of us have at least once in our lives come to the point where we have said, "God cannot love me any more"....

Not after what I did.
Not when I've failed him so abysmally.

Not when my vows, my very baptismal promises lie shattered at my feet.
I have pushed God too far.
I have taken inexcusable liberties.
I have denied my Lord; he will not have me back.

And all of us I suspect have realised that even at our best our walk with God is flawed.

There is little of faithfulness, little of real trust within us.

Listen. Against all our failure, the God we serve declares: "I will not remove my steadfast love, or be false to my faithfulness. I will not violate my covenant. I will not lie."

And the new covenant is not less dependable than the old.

Did not the Son of David, the heir of the promises, declare, "This is my blood of the new covenant, poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins?"

There is no limit to the faithfulness of our God.

But this isn't where the psalm ends.

The assurance that God is faithful when we are not is remarkable enough.

The assurance that God is faithful when the evidence is against it is a further giant leap.

Yet the psalmist makes it.

For in verses 38-51, and only then, do we discover

THE CIRCUMSTANCES OF THIS PSALM

in praise of God's faithfulness.

With a boldness which the Hebrews trusted God enough to express, but we seldom do, God is fairly and squarely blamed for the disaster that has come upon them:

"Now you have rejected your king;
You are full of wrath against your anointed.
You have renounced the covenant.
You have broken through all the walls, and laid the strongholds in ruin.
You have exalted the right hand of his enemies.
You have not supported him in battle.

You have covered him with shame."

Here is a national disaster that more than cancels the victory over Egypt alluded to in verse 10.

Here is a despoiling of the land that negates the calming of any sea.

Here is the degrading of a dynasty that would appear to fatally undermine every prophetic promise.

The individual bereavements that rob us of happiness, however overwhelming, bear no comparison with the death of a nation and its heritage.

The eroding of our rights and the assaults against our person or property, life-destroying though such can be, are but a small thing compared to the pagan desecration of the world's only temple to monotheism.

Even slaughter on the scale we've seen of late in Bosnia or Rwanda, with all the attendant human tragedy, even a world-wide AIDS epidemic, provide but cloudy windows onto the situation of Jerusalem in 586 BC which we need to appreciate if the greatness of this psalm is to reach us with its message.

Because, you see, having said, "God you have brought this tragedy upon us" the conclusion is not to reject him, to affirm that the covenant was a hollow shell...

No! It is to cry out:

"How long, O LORD? Will you hide yourself forever? Lord, where is your steadfast love of old, which by your faithfulness you swore to David?"

Amid the ruins of a city and a temple there is a certain belief that because God is faithful there must be a resurrection.

"How long O Lord?"

After some 600 years, yes 600 years, amid the ruins of the life of one who said "One greater than the Temple is here", because God is faithful there was a resurrection.

In our day, when the very concept of faithfulness seems to be dying, when many people no longer believe in a personal God because they have suffered so much at the hands of persons, dare we proclaim "Our God is Faithful"?

Why is that hard for you?

Perhaps because you have forgotten that your faithlessness, your foolishness, your fickleness,

your forgetfulness, cannot negate his faithfulness.

Perhaps because you once trusted others and they proved themselves unworthy of your trust. Relative, friend or stranger - they robbed you, abused you, reneged on a promise, shamed you, let you down badly. And you cannot believe that God is different.

Perhaps God himself has taken from you everything that ever mattered to you...
Your loved ones, your health, your ambitions and hopes.

Is it really harder than it must have been for this writer?

An Old Testament writer who did not live to see the covenant promise fulfilled in Jesus Christ, who nevertheless insists that God's faithfulness must have the last word.

Despite everything he is prepared to declare God's glorious majesty, to recall God's eternal promises, to admit God's responsibility for the tragedy of his people, and to humbly wait for God to act.

If he so believes in God's faithfulness, might it not be that a faithful God longs to be found by you?

Wouldn't you like to know a God like that?

Indeed can you possibly live without such a God?

Amen.