



## SERMON

### *Introduction*

Recent Church Service overflowing with young people and new converts.  
Altar call – I almost went forward because the God they were describing was so compelling:

- Promising to bless me
- Promising to meet all my needs
- Promising to be my constant companion
- Promising to reward me
- Promising a fulfilled life
- Almost like a continuous tweet from God

I almost went forward – this God sounded so perfect - so amenable and so predictable  
Not at all like the God I am growing to know, who at times:

- exasperates me,
- keeps me guessing,
- is annoyingly silent just when I need him to speak out,
- seems to forget a lot of his promises
- and at times seems to forget me

The Jews were no strangers to these moments – even a cursory reading of Psalms highlights an emotional seesawing between moments of pure ecstasy “bless the Lord, Oh my soul” to moments of total abject agony “there is no God”

Over third of psalms are psalms of lament – they're raw, they're passionate, border on rudeness

And yet here's the thing God does not seem to mind – indeed he goes further and praises one of the biggest lamenters of the lot – King David.

### **Psalm 77:1- 6 exposition**

- v 1 – 6 cries out to God - vey raw:
- I Cry for Help
- I Seek
- I think

- I moan
- I am distressed
- refuses comfort, groaned, spirit grew faint
- completely self absorbed – every verse “I”

His complaints are clearly addressed to God - never doubts that God is not there  
Sense that he has some legitimate grounds to stand on and some legitimate expectations of God:

- That He can be moved and
- That he will do something about it

### **My Own Experience**

I was the golden haired boy, youngest CEO of a DHB, hoovered up every imaginable prize, living in paradise, I could afford not to return the calls of the headhunters because they would always ring again.

The a storm struck, of such intensity and duration that at its height:

- 8 separate inquiries
- Whistleblower
- Allegations of affairs
- Secret tapings
- Defamation writs
- Named in the House
- Kids were bullied at School
- The plumber
- Never really present at home – physically present but my head was elsewhere
- Hate waking up in middle of the night
- Didn't lose friends over it but friends took sides and we learnt who our real friends were

My board was sacked by one Government and I was asked to stay. Then there was a change of Government and I was asked to leave.

Innocent of all charges but unemployable in NZ – a forced sunset on a 22 year health career that had taken us around the world.

Like the psalmist, even at the height of the storm I never doubted that God was not there, but also like the Psalmist I railed against him

- I felt completely disorientated – all the familiar landmarks were gone
- I wrestled with God reminding him that really he was the one on trial – everyone knew I was a Christian – so if I lost he lost!
- Reminding him – the good guys are always meant to win – especially the guys playing on your team
- I was angry at the injustice of it all
- I was angry that seemingly he didn't care

But God seemed silent, I felt very much on my own, there was not much comfort and I was scared – what would happen next

### **Critical Turning Point**

Psalm 77 v 10 - Jerusalem Bible

*“this is what I said distressed me, that the power of the most High is no longer what it once was”*

or CEV *“Then I said God most high what hurts me most is that you no longer help us with your mighty arm”*

At this point it could have gone either way for the psalmist:

- Descended into despair – there is no hope, God is no longer all powerful
- Or grasped a new reality – God is no longer what he once was to the psalmist – he is even more – God is free to do as he chooses

Moved from denial and anger to a new acceptance and understanding of the nature of God.

It moves from being all about “I” and my troubles to being all about “You” – a move from **my** present to **our** past as he remembers back to the good times

Rest of the Psalm is like a creed as he remembers God

### **My Critical Turning Point**

Critical event happened – which, in my mind, crossed a line – decided the right thing to do was to act, even though I knew it would cost me my job, our lifestyle in Hawke’s Bay, what remained of my reputation.

Believe me it is a very lonely place to stand as a leader when you choose to challenge the very things you hold most dear.

“For those who want to save their life will lose it and those who lose their life for my sake will gain it” (Mark 8:35)

An extraordinary thing happened next – it unexpectedly brought with it a huge freedom and sense of control.

Sadly all the things I had predicted re. my own career and professional standing did come to pass over time, but I knew I had done the right thing and could sleep well at night.

### **Application**

- What does the Psalm and my experience teach me about myself
- What does it teach me about God?

### **What does it teach me about myself?**

*TS Elliott “We all had the experience but few the meaning”*

#### **a) Waiting in the Silence**

The Psalmist moves from disorientation to reorientation. He:

- Remember God’s deeds – the crossing of the Red Sea

- He Meditates on God's miracles
- His power
- His presence and leadership

The abrupt change between v 10 and v 11 between disorientation and reorientation presents and reads as if it occurred in an instant

In reality – typically long periods of waiting, wrestling before denial and turns to acceptance and transformation

Even a cursory read of the scripture shows that waiting was a normal and indeed critical part of the human journey – Abraham, Job, David even Jesus waited 30 years (or 90% of his earthy life) before his calling really kicked in

I learnt that in the time of waiting, it was far from waiting for God to do something it was much more about God waiting for me to become the person he could use

I am slowly and somewhat reluctantly coming to realize that my journey is more about becoming than ever it was about doing.

### **b) Lament is a normal part of the Christian Life**

Many of our Christian friends found it profoundly uncomfortable – it did not fit with their presupposition about God. Their comments were reduced to platitudes – not too dissimilar to Job's 'helpful' friends

Frankly found a number of our Christian friends not particularly helpful. I think a lot of them found it quite hard to get their heads around evil – and would somewhat naively tell us "it will all work out in the end". They were the ones who were most shocked when it finally blew up

Found much more comfort with our friends who were not Christians so we orientated towards them

Similarly with churches – we seemingly prefer to fill our services with songs of praise and given the choice of a good chorus or prayers of lament for the world most opt for the song every time. Yet we prefer to fill our liturgies with praise and triumph, rather than wrestling openly with the troubling reality that our experience of God is often one of hurt, disillusionment and pain.

Thus we end up relegating agony and distress with God to the very fringes of the church, or to the social sciences -

Not realizing that in doing so we are denying the very essence of being human and sending a very powerful message to those in agony that they are the problem.

And yet David orders that the men of Judah are taught to lament (2 Sam 1:18)

### **c) My World View enables me to be angry with God**

Like the Psalmist my world view is centred on a God who cares passionately for his people:

- That I am fearfully and wonderfully made
- I am loved
- That there is a unique calling on my life

- That my life is not my own
- That what I do with my life matters.
- That I never walk this life alone.

It gave me the permission to be angry with God. In a curious way I found that my lament was God honouring.

### **What does it teach me about God?**

#### **a) Sense that we were in this together**

Golden Bay – flooded bridge

- realized that it is God's nature to ride with us rather than rescue us from the disasters:

*"Most people have, at some time or other, to stand alone and to suffer and their final shape is determined by their response to their probation. They emerge either as slaves of circumstances or in some senses captains of their soul"*

Charles Raven (Professor of Divinity Cambridge University, 1932)

#### **b) That God is Free**

He cannot be boxed and refuses to conform to our own presumptions of him

He is unapologetically himself

I worship a free God.

### **Conclusion**

The Psalm ends abruptly – we never get to learn what caused the distress or whether it was ever addressed. My own situation also ended somewhat abruptly, however, on reflection the opportunity to lament, coupled with a strong sense of the need to forgive enabled me (and the family) to move on. It has changed me and I still find I am sometimes brought back into the situation (eg seeing a board member in the street) but a healing has begun and I am the richer for the experience (even if I can not yet thankful for the experience!)

Returning to the Church service and the altar call, maybe it is not so far from my own experience as I first thought:

- You know the my experience has been that he has been my constant companion
- He has blessed me but not in the ways I expected
- He has cared for me and never gives up on me – instead he seeks to shape me to be truly free
- Both God is free and I am free

It the kind of God I enjoy worshipping and also just occasionally getting really grumpy with - and he seems to like it that way!