

## The Lord Almighty is our strength

From my dormer bedroom window in the council house I was brought up in I could see Eilean Donan castle – it used to be on every shortbread biscuit tin Walkers seemed to produce produced! The castle dates back to the 13<sup>th</sup> century when it was built as a refuge against the Viking invaders. The villagers lived in the surrounding area and when the attackers came they would run to the castle and take refuge against the marauders. In a sense it provided 24/7 protection. It was there for whenever it was needed. (Terror attacks cause some to fear...where the next one...)

The sense of this psalm is that God himself is the refuge for his church, his people. They work and live in his pastures, in close proximity to him. He is there 24/7 and come the terrors of night or day the people of God can find refuge and strength in Him. The Lord Almighty is our strength is the repeated refrain vs 7, 11

Was it under such conditions that the writer of this psalm was writing? It seems war is all about them. But in the midst of the storm of war his trust is not in the strength of their armies, in the thickness of the walls or the strategic position of the city but in the Lord. In one sense that might seem a bit like sticking your head in the sand. You need battlements, armies and so on. That is true but this psalm is about in whom ultimately is our trust even when things go belly up. Trust in a God whose deliverance at times is even miraculous.

John Paton was a missionary in the New Hebrides Islands. One night hostile natives surrounded the mission station, intent on burning out the Patons and killing them. Paton and his wife prayed during that terror-filled night that God would deliver them. When daylight came they were amazed to see their attackers leave. A year later, the chief of the tribe was converted to Christ. Remembering what had happened, Paton asked the chief what had kept him from burning down the house and killing them. The chief replied in surprise, "Who were all those men with you there?" Paton knew no men were present--but the chief said he was afraid to attack because he had seen hundreds of big men in shining garments with drawn swords circling the mission station.

It raises the question who or what is our refuge and strength? There are lots of things we can put our trust in. It might be in ourselves – our ability to tough it out, in our ability to talk ourselves in or out of situations, in our IQ, our money, our influence. It might be in our family. It might be in the medical profession. These things are provisions from the good hand of God but they are not to be the things we ultimately take strength and refuge from. Not if we are God's people.

There are times in life when the strength can be taken from us. Ill health, sudden job loss and so on. I remember my knees literally buckling under me when I heard on the phone that my mother had inoperable

cancer. It is that kind of moment that the psalmist is saying

vs 1 “God is our refuge and strength, an ever present help in trouble.” Those are the times we are to run to the refuge of our lives.

## **Radical Trust**

This is a radical trust in the Lord. This is faith up against it. This is confidence in God. And for all of us there are times when we will be up against it. When the things we have learned and experienced of God will be tested. So we need to ensure, as someone said recently, that in the good times we are developing fat stores of faith to serve us in the lean periods.

The book of psalms is a book of blessing for faith – it declares blessing on all who enter. The first word of psalm 1 is blessing. There is blessing for life and faith here. There is stuff that we need to hear in these psalms which give expression for life in all its vagaries. Here we are learning the blessing of trust in the tough times.

Vs 2-3 give the impression of chaos. They are set in contrast to Genesis 1 when God spoke his word and out of the chaos came order. Here all creation is set back into chaos. It is the worst situation imaginable when even the ground you stand on is not secure. The psalmist is saying even though chaos descends

ultimate trust is in God. He is the one we run to when the marauders come. He is the one we turn to give us strength. He is one who is vs 2 the ever present help, (lit. give help just when it is needed). Who enables us to stand fearless, trusting in his eternal purposes that ultimately mean life with him in heaven. It is not that we experience no fear but that we are given strength and courage to face the situation.

The psalmist is setting us a challenge here. He is saying here is the bar (standard) for faith. Here is the thing to be aiming for. That even though it may seem that hell itself has broken loose God remains our refuge and strength, an ever present help in trouble.

How close to a radical faith like that are we. Some way to go? I guess we all have but there is the challenge, that over the coming weeks and months we aim at developing that radical trust. The church programme is set up to develop and find faith – services, house groups, powerhouse, reading groups, bible reading notes, bookstalls. They are all there to develop this kind of faith – we must make use of them or else we will never grow and come the day of trouble we will miss out on the strength God had for us when we trust in him.

What a challenge but I think we all need to hear it don't you? We need to hear examples of faith to aspire to. So that we too can join fully in the adventure of faith and trust in God. Radical trust like this is not for the

missionaries living hand to mouth in Indonesian jungles. Radical trust is for all who follow the Lord. Our quest is to establish that radical trust when in a sense we lack nothing – pension policy is set up, welfare system is a fall back for us, there is always the equity on the house and so on. But find it we can and see our lives being used by God in remarkable ways we will. As we shift our view of the world from one of faith in what is seen to faith in what is unseen and yet no less real. This is the faith we are to model to our children, they will grasp it if they can see it in their family and friends.

The word 'selah' there are the bottom right of verses 3, 7 and 11 help us see how the psalm breaks up. The first section is about Radical Trust, the second section has a complete change of mood, much more peaceful.

vs 4 “There is a city whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy place where the most high dwells...”

The waters of chaos have turned into the life giving channel and tributaries of a river the flows through a city and brings life to it. The city is of course Jerusalem but the irony is that there was no such river in Jerusalem. The life giving source is then something else. It is of course God and his presence. The river is the holy place where the most high dwells, which was of course the holy of holies in the temple. Where God had covenanted to dwell so vs 5 “God is within her” and so “She will not fall; God will help her at the break of day”. We have hope for God is with us

## **God is with us**

The life giving stream is God himself. He is the one who is the water of life. Here we hear echoes of Jesus own words. Remember the encounter with the woman at the well?

John 4:13 Jesus answered, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, 14but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life."

Water is vital to life. It is a precious commodity in the arid middle east. It brings that which is essential to life. More essential than that is the Lord himself who gives us what is necessary for eternal life. His presence and work amongst us are the things that makes the ultimate difference.

Because e.g. he is one who speaks vs 6 and the earth melts. Nothing can contravene his word. Scientists reckon the temperature required to begin the universe is 10 thousand million million million million degrees Kelvin. Our God is the very life force of the universe that could create that needed to create the universe. Who can stand in the way of his redeeming love and purposes? As Paul says, If Christ is for us who can be against us? The one who will see us safely into his eternal home.

The interesting thing is that there is a flip side to this. Some years later the prophet Jeremiah preached to the people because they had become complacent. The temple had become like a talisman. Their trust was no longer in God but simply in the presence of the temple, the church building if you like. It was their lucky charm. But God's presence and protection was only guaranteed to those who yielded to his code for living, his way, his covenant.

It is possible to just become complacent with God. We assume he will love us no matter how we live. But Jesus himself says, "those who have my commands and obey them they are the ones who love me". I think we can become complacent, we hear so much about the love of God but God is no pushover. But we want his redeeming love, we need to get with his life transforming programme. A programme for life and living that makes sense of the human condition and every circumstance in life. Then we can say in confident affirmation, "The Lord Almighty is with us, the God of Jacob is our fortress."

In the final section we see God pictures as a warrior who does not revel in war but brings it to an end. The final exhortation is really to trust in the Lord.

### **Trust in the Lord**

vs 10 "Be still and know that I am God;" , the sense here

is more like cease what you are doing, like trying to separate to boys scrapping in the playground. STOP. We are to stop all our striving and struggling in our own strength and abilities and know that THE LORD IS GOD. That the heaven and the earth and everything in it are HIS. YOU are his. What you have is his. He is sovereign and in the end every knee will bow and acknowledge that he is Lord. He will be exalted in the nations. Gentle Jesus meek and mild. Not a bit of it. He is the one who brings order in the chaos of the universe, the one who is the lifegiving water, before whom the nations melt, THE warrior who brings peace, shattering the spear. This Lord is our refuge and our strength, our ever present help. Cease your stressing and know him as he is. Trust and follow him. Know with assurance that the Lord Almighty is with us. The God of Jacob is our fortress.

Take a moment to reflect. What stops you having this radical trust in God? What are the things you fear? Tell him in the moment silence and ask him to help you, help us to trust in his 24/7 ever present help and to be our strength and refuge.