

Sermon 14th June 2020

THE GOODNESS OF GOD – David Linley

INTRODUCTION

Hello, and can I just begin by adding my welcome to Trinity Baptist Church, Bexleyheath.

Whether this is your very first visit, or you've been involved with the church for as long as you can remember, it's really great to have you worshipping with us today.

And if you've never actually found your way to us, I really hope that you will give us a try, once we're able to open up again. Which hopefully won't be too long now. We really would love to welcome you.

I'm David Linley, and along with my wife Anne, we've been involved in the church here since we moved into the area just over six years ago. Before that, we were for over 40 years, working with the London City Mission.

So. How have you been finding things?

How's it been going for you in these unusual days?

Have you been enjoying your family? Or have the kids been driving you crazy?

Perhaps you've been really missing the grandchildren?

Or have you been busy painting the spare room or tidying out the shed?

Maybe you're struggling with your health or your relationships?

Perhaps you're just worried or fearful, not knowing what the future holds?

Well whatever your situation. However you're feeling, I have two, almost separate things, that I want to share today which I trust you will find helpful:

- Firstly, some real and definite hope, looking reasonably quickly at Psalm 121
- And then concluding with a brief challenge about our response to God in these totally unprecedented times

So first let me ask my wife Anne to read Psalm 121 to us.

READING

Psalm 121 New Living Translation

A song for pilgrims ascending to Jerusalem.

1 I look up to the mountains—

does my help come from there?

2 My help comes from the Lord,

who made heaven and earth!

3 He will not let you stumble;

the one who watches over you will not slumber.

4 Indeed, he who watches over Israel

never slumbers or sleeps.

5 The Lord himself watches over you!

The Lord stands beside you as your protective shade.

6 The sun will not harm you by day,

nor the moon at night.

7 The Lord keeps you from all harm

and watches over your life.

8 The Lord keeps watch over you as you come and go, both now and forever.

SERMON PART ONE

This is a great psalm! One of a group of fifteen (going from Ps 120 to Ps 134) that were originally sung by the Jewish Pilgrims, as they journeyed up to Jerusalem for their main festivals.

They were often called the 'Psalms of Ascent' – sung by the faithful as they went along.

Psalm 121 begins (Verse One) with a question, asked as they looked up to the mountains where they were heading: 'Does my help come from there?'

As they anticipated that hard climb, up to the Jerusalem and the Temple, they were asking in effect: 'Where will our help come from?'

It's a great question!

And that's a question that I would like us to ask ourselves today - Where does your help come from? Where do you usually look, where do you usually go when trouble comes?

Let's make no mistake about it. We are obviously facing a huge task at the moment.

Some of us, much more than others.

Mountains, that we have never had to climb before.

A journey, that none of us would have knowingly chosen.

A journey - where the actual destination is still quite uncertain.

At present, for whatever reason, what lies before us may seem much too big for us to overcome. Totally beyond our control or ability. And the question is: 'At such a time as this, where does our help come from?'

The NIV Application Commentary on this psalm begins with the statement: When your world turns dark and your journey turns rugged, where do you turn for help? What is your source, for the confidence you need to face the storms of life?

Verse Two gives the Pilgrim's answer: (It's a great answer!)

"My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth"

In days like we are in now, if you really are able to say this and mean it for sure – then that is a great blessing and you should thank God for it.

This is our God, WHO IS TOTALLY IN CONTROL OF EVERYTHING - so if we know Him, we can really trust everything to Him.

He is the God of yesterday, going way back to before the very beginning,

I say before the beginning because He planned for our salvation in Jesus Christ - even from before He created the heavens and the earth. WOW!

This may be a strange concept to you. And if it is just try to stay with me for a moment.

First listen to these verses from the bible:

Ephesians 1:4 (NLT)

Even before He made the world, God loved us and chose us in Christ . . .

1 Peter 1:20 (NLT)

God chose Jesus Christ as our ransom long before the world began . . .

It would be true to say that even before the beginning of time God knew everything about you and me.

Here's what David, the shepherd king says about himself:

Psalm 139:16 (NLT)

'You saw me before I was born. Every day of my life was recorded in your book. Every moment was laid out before a single day had passed.' (old KJV says – even before one of your days came to be.)

He is the God of yesterday

He is also the God of today, blessing us and keeping us as we will see in a few moments
and We can also trust Him to be the God of tomorrow

Just thinking about tomorrow generally:

What will our immediate future look like?

Next week, next month, next year.

What will it be like? What are your expectations – good or bad?

Of course, what happens tomorrow is unknown for all of us. And especially in these unprecedented times.

But actually, our future is – and always was – unknown, however well laid our plans might have been. Yet the encouragement for every Christian is that – as we've just seen, the future is never unknown to God.

Do you believe, as I do, and as we've just seen from the bible, that God has planned it all?

Yesterday, Today, and for all our Tomorrows, He knows everything.

When I retired from London City Mission, I'd worked with them for 42 years.

I began my training in 1971 at a Mission Centre in Forest Hill. And as part of that training I was required every Thursday to attend an afternoon meeting for the elderly ladies.

It really was an education for me as a young man in my early 20s and not the thing I looked forward to the most! But they were lovely ladies and had some really interesting stories to tell, particularly about the first and second world wars. Around the bombing and the devastation, and their sweethearts, although I must say, some of those stories were quite sad.

Every week at their little Christian meeting, the ladies were invited to choose two or three of their favourite choruses. And invariably someone would choose this one – and it's very relevant to what we are thinking about today. It went like this:

God holds the key of all unknown

And I am glad

If other hands should hold the key, or if he trusted it to me

I might be sad.

There were other verses that went with that song as well, but I don't recall them now. But many of these lovely ladies knew, that despite the hardship and the sadness of the past, despite their present ailments and with all that the future might hold – they were safe to leave it all in the hands of God most high.

We might fear tomorrow but God is already there waiting for us to arrive.

He is totally omnipresent, which simply means that He is everywhere at once.

God doesn't have to rush around faster than the speed of light, from one place to the next, but He is totally present everywhere.

He is totally outside of time.

Imagine a long and winding river...

and the different perspective from a boat sailing along (we'll be in the boat) and a helicopter hovering high overhead with a view of everything. We are in the boat seeing just what is immediately around us and ahead, but only as far as the next bend. Whilst God, similar to the helicopter pilot, has a view of the whole river from start to finish – so that He

can have a view of everything. This is most certainly not a perfect illustration of how God interacts with time, but, I must say, that down the years it's certainly helped me.

So back to Psalm 121 and Verses Three and Four we're told that God will be there for those who love Him. What a great God He is! He is ever present to watch over us. He never sleeps or even tires. He cares and He's powerful enough to sustain us wherever we are and whatever we need.

In Verses Five and Six we are comforted to know that He is by the side of those who trust Him, watching over them and protecting them during every day, and every night.

And in Verse Seven and Verse Eight we are reminded that He keeps watch over the lives of His children and keeps them from harm in all of their comings and goings, now and forever.

He promises to protect us throughout our lives.

He will be there with us in our death

And He will be with us throughout all eternity.

Now, before we leave this psalm, I want to stop for a moment and deal with something very important.

I want us to think about the fact that, despite all that's been said up to now –

Bad things can and do, happen to Good people

You see without acknowledging this point, someone could go away thinking: 'If I trust in God no bad thing can ever happen to me again'.

Again Psalm 121:7-8 (NLT)

*7 The Lord keeps you from all harm
and watches over your life*

*8 The Lord keeps watch over you, as you come and go,
both now and forever.*

Psalm 91:7 (NLT)

*7 Though a thousand fall at your side,
though ten thousand are dying around you,
these evils will not touch you.*

In one way of course that is exactly right, if you see all this from the standpoint of eternity, and the Christian's promise of Eternal Life. Nothing that happens now can ever affect that wonderful promise that God has made to each of His children.

And it's certainly true, God may give you these verses or similar ones and assure you of His protection in the present time and that's absolutely fine. But it would be very unwise to assume that these verses apply, across the board, to every single believer.

Think about John the Baptist in the New Testament.

He was the cousin of the Lord Jesus Christ and Jesus said of him in Matthew eleven:

I tell you the truth, of all who have ever lived, none is greater than John the Baptist.

Surely then if anyone were ever to be granted special protection, you would think it would be John.

But that wasn't the case. He ended up in prison – and was later beheaded.

Why did God allow it to happen? We just don't really know!

And we won't in this life.

But we do know that we can always trust God in everything.

Romans 8:28 All things work together for good

Then in contrast to this, there's the story of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the book of Daniel chapter three. Those God-fearing officials had been exiled from Israel to Babylon and now were instructed to bow down and worship a 90-foot-high golden idol which was made in the image of the then Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar. Although the penalty for disobedience was death by being thrown into a raging furnace, all three men refused to comply and what they said was really interesting:

If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God whom we serve is able to save us. He will rescue us from your power, Your Majesty. But even if he doesn't, we want to make it clear to you, that we will never serve your gods or worship the gold statue you have set up.

God miraculously delivered them, but those men made it very clear, that they were committed to serving Him either way. And that is how we and every child of God should be.

Before we come to the very brief conclusion of our talk, I'm going to hand back to Helen and John for a song that celebrates the Goodness of God.

If you don't know this song just listen to the words.

Is it possible, that God wants this kind of close relationship, with people just like you?

SERMON PART TWO

I did wonder, if for the last part of my talk,
I should be in my kit,
pedalling away on my exercise bike!
But after thinking about it I thought that it would probably be a step too far!

I've had this bike for about six years now.

And it's still in remarkably good condition –
not because I've looked after it particularly well,
but because I've hardly used it!

That is, not until Covid-19!

Now it's become really important,
especially while I've been self-isolating.

In these days' – no doubt about it, fitness is the thing.

Although, in the past, I've heard myself quoting from part of 1 Timothy 4:18 – Do you know what it says?
'Bodily exercise profits little!'

Well, not anymore! It's really quite important
now to get those joints moving!

In the New Living Translation,
1 Tim 4:18 (the complete verse) is written this way:
'Physical training is good,
but training for godliness is much better,
promising benefits in this life and in the life to come'

However much we might exercise physically
It's exercising spiritually that's the most important.

And now, during this present time, is perhaps the best opportunity we've had in years, for cultivating our relationship with Jesus.

We still have to socially distance now, from each other.
Staying at arm's length – literally.

But it's quite possible, that we've kept God at arm's length for a very long time - whether we would call ourselves practising Christians or not.

(BREAK)

Well the final challenge, that I want to bring to you is about our response to God in these totally unprecedented times.

Now is the perfect time for bringing God close.
Although actually he has always been there and it's us, who haven't taken the time that we should, to get closer to him.

I ADMIT IT – even now I'm not a serious exerciser
I kind of dabble!

Of course, that's better than nothing but being deliberate is the best and most profitable way.

So I'm told – 'The more you put in - the more you'll get out'
And of course, that's true spiritually.

That may not be so easy for you at present:
Working from home
Zoom Calls
Keeping the children occupied

But I would say that every moment that we spend quietly with God really is quality time.

And you don't have to be super religious. This is for anyone and everyone, and whoever you are, I promise you, that the time you spend alone with God is never wasted.

Matthew 7:7 'Ask and you will receive. Seek and you will find. Knock and the door will be opened to you

People have turned to God in their most difficult moments and found that their lives have been massively changed forever.

I want to invite you now to make a definite response to God, who sacrificed His one and only Son on the cross, to open the way for you to return to Him.

I'm going to say a short prayer, which I'm asking you to say along with me, if you know that it's time for you, from this moment on, to take your relationship with God seriously.

You don't have to pray it out loud. Whisper it in your heart and God will hear you, and He will answer.

Here's the prayer:

Thank you God,

that I can come to you now, as I am,

and ask for your forgiveness.

I need you; I want you in my heart and life,

to make me the person that I should be,

from this day forward.

In Jesus' Name I pray. Amen

If you prayed that prayer,
it would be really good,
if you could get in touch and let us know.

Our contact details are on the website.

Thanks, and God Bless you.