

Trust and Obey

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[0 : 0 0] Good afternoon everyone, my name is Ian and it's my privilege to take you through this very long psalm that Alistair read so well for us. Quite a difficult psalm in many ways, but I hope one that we'll gain a lot from.

I want to start with a couple of questions. So the first question is, what is your view of the British Empire? Now some of you may say that's ancient history, I have no view at all.

I'm sure some of you have reasonably strong views. Some of you may say the British Empire was a high point in our national history. When Britannia ruled not only the waves, but great swathes of the land around our world, and was able to bring to them civilisation and also the Christian message.

Other people may say the British Empire was a prime example of white supremacism, of colonialism, of subduing people, of taking their freedom and their land.

And I think perhaps if you went around the church you'd find both views, and certainly if you went out into the streets you'd find both views. It depends how you look at history. Second question, similarly, what do you think of Winston Churchill?

[1 : 1 6] Was Winston Churchill the greatest prime minister this country ever had, who saved us and the world from the scourge of Nazism? Or was he a drunken racist who had many miserable failures and only won the Second World War because the Americans came in and did all the hard work?

Again, different views depending on how you look at it. Winston Churchill actually reviewed this. He said, history will be kind to me, for I intend to write it.

And indeed he did write the history of the Second World War. But how we look at history very much depends on our vantage point in terms of what we take from it. Last week, if you were here, you may remember we were looking at Psalm 105.

Psalm 105 is a great psalm of praise to God, looking back at all that God had done for Israel. It was all about the history of the nation of Israel, stopping roughly when they entered the Promised Land, and it was all about what God had done.

And you'll remember that Nick Blair very powerfully invited us to reflect on what God has done in our lives and to thank him for it. Psalm 106, as you have gathered from when we read it, is very different.

[2 : 3 1] It's looking back at the history of Israel, but it's looking back more as a prayer of confession. Looking back on all the wrong things that the Israelites had done.

Most likely it's written around the time of Daniel or maybe Nehemiah. And actually, if you go to the two books with their names, you'll find quite similar prayers of confession. Now, as we said, it's a very long psalm.

So how do we get into it? I think over the last two summers, when we've been looking at book four of the book of Psalms, I've learned two very helpful things if you want to very quickly get to grips with the psalms.

The first is, in a psalm, it's very often helpful to look at the beginning, to look at the end, and to look at the center. So if we look at the beginning of this psalm and the end of this psalm, they're both the same.

It is, praise the Lord. In the Hebrew, it's hallelujah. One of these Hebrew words that has come forward to English is hallelujah, is the way the psalmist begins and ends.

[3 : 31] In the 48th verse, Psalm, the middle verse is verses 24 and 25. And among other things, what they say is they did not believe his promise and did not obey the Lord.

So the core of the psalm is the failure of the Israelites, God's people. They did not believe. They did not obey. And as we move out in the psalm, we see more and more of that.

But that's not the only thing the psalmist wants us to remember. He wants us to start with God and to sing praises to God. And he wants us to end with God and sing praises to God.

It's not a psalm that's just miserable how awful Israel's been and how hopeless the situation is. It's ultimately a psalm that says we have a great God and despite our failures, still God works among us and he shows us his grace and his mercy.

And therefore, we should sing hallelujah. We should shout amen as we think of the wonders of our God. So if that's a very brief overview of the psalm, let me move on to the second thing I've learned over the last 16 months or so as we looked at the psalms.

[4 : 45] And that is that an awful lot of the psalms, if you look at the first half of the psalm and the second half of the psalm, there's a real symmetry of thought to them. Something that picks up in the first half of the psalm, if you look towards the end, it's there again.

And so actually quite a good way with many of these psalms is to start in the middle and to work your way out and to see the parallels and the different bits of the psalm and then you get a good flavour of it.

And I hope, we've got about 20 minutes to speak on the psalm this morning, I hope that we'll be able to do that and perhaps get a bit of an understanding of what the psalm is about, what it says about us and what it says about God.

So we'll start, as I said, in the middle and the middle section is really verses 24 to 27. And I've headed these ones, disbelief.

Now the historical incident here is the Israelites have been going through the wilderness, they've been going for maybe a couple of years and they're pretty close to the land of Canaan that they'd been promised.

[5 : 46] And they send 12 spies out and the spies go and they look around and they see and they say, yes, a land flowing with milk and honey as we've been promised. Look, here are all the grapes we've brought back, but we're never going to be able to take it.

They've got these big fortified cities, they've got giants. There's no way that we in our puny state are going to be able to go in and take the land. They didn't believe that God was able to help them to do that.

Some of you may remember the old children's chorus about this. It says, some saw giants strong and tall, some saw grapes in clusters fall, but some saw God was in it all.

Ten were bad, two were good. But sadly the ten who were described here as bad, the ten who didn't believe they could take the land won the day with the people and they rebelled against Moses.

And they spent the next 38 years passing around in the wilderness until that generation died out and the next generation went in and conquered the land. They had disbelief in what God had said he would do and they suffered the consequences of it.

[6 : 57] What do we learn from that? We learn that we must trust and obey God. That is what they failed in here, isn't it? They didn't believe his promises. They did not obey the Lord.

They looked and they saw the difficulty and thought, this is far too hard for us. We're not going to do what Moses, as God's servant, has told us we should do. We're going to keep wandering around in circles and really getting nowhere because we don't believe the promises of God.

That wrote him, for many of us, I'm sure, trust and obey, for there's no other way to be happy in Jesus but to trust and obey.

That might sound a bit cheesy, it might even sound a bit glib, but there's a great truth in it. Unless we have our trust, our confidence in Jesus, unless we're willing to obey him and to do what he sends us to do, we're never really going to have a real joy and satisfaction in our lives.

We're not talking about big grins all the time, but we're talking about a real underlying satisfaction and joy in Jesus. And that only comes when we trust and obey.

[8 : 13] And how many of us can look back and think about times when we've failed to trust and obey? Over the last month, the staff team has been looking at a book by Rico Tice called Honest Evangelism.

One of the summer small groups has been looking at that as well. And I've been really challenged by it. So I look back over my time in secular employment, and I think, how much did I really witness to those I worked alongside?

Yes, they knew I was a Christian, they knew I had a faith, they knew I went to church, but it was kind of a lot of times on the level, well, you're a Christian, I play football, she's a musician. It was what I did, but didn't really have any impact on them.

And I can look back and think many, many times when I've had opportunities to share my faith, to talk about Jesus to people, and I didn't do it. And why not? And Rico Tice really puts his finger on it.

It is partly because I didn't trust, because I didn't believe that I could do it, that I didn't believe that if I did it, that they would listen to me or it would make any difference. And partly with just plain disobedience.

[9 : 21] That I knew that I should tell people the glorious message of the God who sent his son to die for us, and I just didn't do it.

And that's exactly the same kind of thing as the Israelites are condemned for here. They knew what they should do, but they didn't believe that they could do it, and so they didn't obey God.

So there's a challenge to all of us this morning. Do we really, when it comes to the bit, do we really trust in God when times are hard? Are we willing to obey him? Let's move out a bit, and I've called the next section Disloyalty.

So if you've got your Bibles in front of you, this extends broadly from verse 16 to 23, and then the second half of the chapter from verses 28 to 31. So at the start of 16 to 23, the people rebel against Moses and Aaron.

They're jealous of them. And then they rebel against God. Moses goes up the mountain to get the commandments. He comes down, and while he's been away, the people have built this golden calf, and they're worshipping it rather than God.

[10 : 28] And then in 28 to 31, again the people are rebelling. They're being disloyal to God, and they're particularly taking foreign wives and others into the camp and getting involved again in pagan worship.

They are disloyal to God. Again, challenge to us, are we at times disloyal to God? What particularly struck me, though, about these verses was what is said about Moses and about Phineas.

Moses stood, and Phineas stood. Moses stood in the breach, it says in the version that I have. He stood in the breach before him, that's before God, to keep his wrath from destroying them.

In other words, as God saw the wickedness and disloyalty of the Israelites, and was minded just to have nothing more to do with them, Moses went and he prayed fervently, and he made a difference, as he pleaded with God to keep his covenant and to give his people another chance.

Phineas stood up, it says, and he acted. What he actually did was to kill one of the Israelites who was particularly involved in the sin that the people have got involved in, and it was counted to him, it says, for righteousness.

[11 : 47] But the point is, when it came to the bit, and the people were in trouble, and in trouble because of their own sin, these two men were willing to get involved and to do what it took to sort things out.

Moses by praying, Phineas by acting. And again, I was a bit challenged. When in our church we've got people who are going through times of difficulty, perhaps people who've fallen into sin, and that's become apparent, what is our response?

Is our response to get on our knees before God and to pray fervently for those who have a real need and who particularly need the experience of his grace?

Is it where it's necessary to take action, perhaps to go and have a quiet word with someone, or to make sure that they know what is right and what is wrong? Or do we at times just kind of ignore it and hope it goes away?

We need to be willing to stand and to take whatever action it is to protect and to love and to care for each other as we go through difficult times and perhaps times of failure in our lives.

[13 : 02] After all, if we do that, are we not just doing exactly what Jesus did? Jesus came and he saw there was only one way in which our sins could be forgiven.

And so he chose to go to the cross and to take our place. And still he is before God pleading for us, pleading the case of us miserable sinners, as he presents his own blood as being the thing through which God can forgive us.

Let's stand together and when one is suffering or when one is going through a time where they've fallen, let's make sure we don't neglect them. Let's make sure we don't push them further away from God.

Let's be on our knees and perhaps also actively helping them. So that was Israel's failure in disloyalty. Now we're moving fairly quickly this morning because this is a long passage.

Let's move on to the next section which I've called discontent. The people of Israel were a miserable bunch. Moses led them out of Egypt, out of slavery, out of the horrendous circumstances they were in.

[14 : 08] And they never stopped complaining all the way through in the wilderness. How frustrating it must have been for Moses. How saddening it must have been for God that his people just didn't appreciate all that had been done for them.

So in the first instance here in verses 13 to 15, the people have come to Moses and said, we can't stand this manna that God is giving us. Every day we have the same diet, this kind of bread type thing, and we don't like it, we're just fed up with it.

And Moses prays to God and God sends quails to provide for them. We'll talk about what happens after that in a minute. In the second incident, the people are complaining about water again.

This is a bit of a recurring theme through the water. We're a bit thirsty. Moses, you need to do something about it. We've been better off if we've been back in Egypt than being out in the wilderness here with you. In this case, Moses gets really frustrated.

God tells him he's got to talk to the rock and water will come out of it. Moses hits the rock with a stick and water comes out, but it has consequences for him.

[15 : 16] In both cases, the people were discontented. They asked for something. They got it. But then there were consequences.

So verse 15 says, God gave them what they asked for, but. But he sent a wasting plague on them. Many people fell ill and died as a result.

He gave them the water they wanted at the end, but it came at a great cost to Moses because Moses was no longer able to lead them into the promised land because he had disobeyed God.

God gave them what they wanted, but what they wanted wasn't right, and that had consequences for them. Is there a parallel in that in our society today?

We have things that people in previous generations couldn't even have dreamed of. The amount of technology we have, the comfort that most of us live in, the possessions that we have, even if we're not, in terms of this country, particularly well off.

[16 : 22] These are far more than people had in the past. And yet we still want more. It's still not enough for us. We're a greedy society.

As individuals, probably we're greedy as well. And that has consequences. Yes, we've got what we want in many ways. I want to buy something.

I go to Amazon. If I can afford it, I get it. And it keeps me happy for a very short time. But it means we're in a society where really people have this unhappiness, discontent with their circumstances.

They always want more. They always want what other people have. As I said, the immediate context of verse 15 was God sending a physical plague on the Israelites.

But a lot of people, when they look at this, think it wasn't just that, that God was doing. So Alec Mottier, one of the great Old Testament commentators, translates this verse.

[17 : 19] He says he gave them their request and sent emaciation into their souls. Not physical suffering he is talking about. It is emaciation, degradation, and misery within their souls.

And that is very much, I think, the case today in our society. People have everything they could possibly want in many cases. Still they want more. Still they're not happy. Donald Coggan was an Ashbury's of a country, I think about 20, 25 years ago now, a fine evangelical Christian.

And he wrote this about this verse from Psalm 96. He says, We're breeding a race unable to think, fed on misleading soundbites, unable to endure silence, unable to ponder, still less to pray.

A wasting disease is on the rampage. And I don't think in the last 20 years that's really changed very much. And Coggan goes on to talk about the press and the things we want to read in them or see on the television and so on.

Have we as a society, and more importantly, have we as individuals got this kind of wasting disease? We've got what we want, we can get by and large the things we aspire to. And yet in our souls, have we lost it?

[18 : 37] Have we lost that dependence on God? Have we lost that joy that we can have in God when we know that everything we have is through him and that we depend wholly upon him?

We've got what we ask for, we've got what we want in many ways, but what has been the impact for us? I'll leave you to think about that in your own life. Finally, as we're thinking about the Israelites, and we will come on to something a bit more positive in a minute, the last thing I've called disobedience.

Now this is two quite substantial sections, we're going to go over them very quickly, but two quite substantial periods of Israel's history. The one is when they were in Egypt, remember they went down to Egypt with Joseph and Jacob and the family, and then over time they became slaves, and then the second is after they went into the promised land, and it probably takes us right through, as I said, to the time of Jeremiah, Daniel, even on to Nehemiah.

And the psalmist looks back, and he says, we have sinned. Reading of verse 6, we have sinned, we have done wrong, and acted wickedly.

And he goes on to talk about how the people didn't remember God's kindness, how they didn't want to obey him in crossing the Red Sea. Even worse towards the end of the chapter, the people of God promised them, they're in the promised land, Joshua's taken in there.

[19 : 59] They've seen these great victories, but they don't finish the job. They don't make sure that the land is purged of the other nations, and we drag them down, and so over time they get dragged into the culture of the other nations.

And you have idolatry, you have immorality, even child sacrifices, all sorts of terrible things going on because the people hadn't obeyed God and continued not to obey him.

Miserable, isn't it? Except, both the beginning of the chapter and the end of the chapter, it talks about how God saved his people.

Verse 8, He saved them for his name's sake to make his mighty power known. He rebuked the Red Sea and dried it up, and so on, and so on. And then towards the end of the chapter, it talks about God was angry, and he let nations oppress them, but it says, Yet he took note of their distress when he heard their cry.

For their sake, he remembered his covenant. Out of his great love, he relented. Isn't it wonderful that we've got a God who when we fail, and fail, and fail again, when we turn back to him, when we recognize our failure, he's always willing to take us back and to restore us into a relationship with him.

[21 : 22] I was struck in this section by two phrases. In the first bit, it talks about how God doing something for his name's sake, and then in the second section, it talks about him doing something for their sake.

That is, the Israelites. God wants to be seen as the great God of heaven, as the one who is in control, and who keeps his promises, and who looks after his people, and the psalmist says, for his name's sake, he didn't let them rot in Egypt and stay a slave forever.

For his name's sake, he made the way for them to be released and to go on to the promised land. But then for their sake, at the end of the chapter, for their sake, despite all their years and years of failure, despite everything that they'd done that was against God's will and was disobedient to it, for their sake, he remembered his covenant and out of his great love he relented.

That's the God we have. A God who is all-powerful and in control and he does things for his name's sake so that he may be seen to be the great God of heaven. He does things for our sake so that we may enjoy a relationship with him so that we may be forgiven despite all our failures.

When we look at the life of the Lord Jesus, why did Jesus come to this earth? Why did he go to the cross for us? He did it for his father's sake so that God's name might be glorified.

[22 : 53] So that the God who is a God of love and of compassion would be seen to be that, not just a God of judgment as people might have thought of him. That people around the world, countless multitudes, would come to worship the great God of heaven and to praise him for who he is.

And he did it for our sake. He did it for my sake. He went to the cross at Calvary. He took my sins on himself so that I could be forgiven, so that I could have a relationship with God.

Haven't we got a wonderful saviour who was willing to come to die on the cross for us and for our sake as well as for his father's sake to give his life for our redemption?

I've only got a few minutes left. Let's look briefly at the beginning and end of the psalm, which are the really positive bits, if you like. I've called this section Prayer and Praise. So verses 45 and verse 47 are the psalmist's prayer.

It is a prayer that he and his people might be remembered by God and might be saved by him. And in his prayer, he hangs on to the things that he knows about God.

[24 : 09] He knows that God is a God who saves, who again and again has saved his people when they turn to him and is able still to save. He knows that he is a God who is bounteous in his generosity to his people.

And he said, I want to enjoy the prosperity of your chosen ones that I may share in the joy of your nation, and join your inheritance in giving praise. He hangs on to the fact that God is loving, God is generous, and he thinks about God's glory part of the purpose of his prayer.

Verse 47, that we may give thanks to your holy name and glory in your praise. The psalmist is coming with a great prayer of confession and recognizing the utter failure of the people.

And yet he's coming with a knowledge that God will listen to him, that God will save, that God will be generous, that God ultimately will bring glory to his name. And then there's the praise.

Why should the psalmist praise? Well, he says, I praise God because of his unending love. Give thanks to the Lord for he is good.

[25 : 23] His love endures forever. And then he thinks about God's unlimited power. Who can proclaim the mighty acts of the Lord or fully declare his praises?

And then he thinks of God's unfailing justice. Blessed are those who act justly, always do what is right because the implication is because they're doing what our God does.

A psalmist wants to end as he began with praising God. And so in verse 14, he says, Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting.

Let all the people say, Amen. Praise the Lord. And we want to leave this psalm not just thinking about the failure of the Israelites and the failure that we have had.

We need to leave this psalm and need to leave this book of psalms that we've been looking at for Psalm 90 through to 106 that we've looked at over the last year or so. We want to leave it with a great hymn of praise to our God, recognising how great he is.

[26 : 29] But at the same time, we need to recognise our weakness. We started by thinking about history, the history of our nation, the history of Israel.

Let's end with our personal history. As I look back over my life, I can see many, many times I've failed God. I talked about some earlier in my times of my witness.

I could equally have talked about my prayerlessness. I could have talked about my impurities. I could have talked about my thoughtlessness at times. Many, many other things. I can look back and as I look back on my life, maybe this happens more as you get older, I become more and more aware of the ways in which I've failed God and I've done things that are not right.

But then I look back at my life and I think, I am so blessed by God that despite my fail, despite my inadequacy, he chose to draw me to him, that I was brought to a faith in the Lord Jesus.

I have the assurance of eternal life through him. I have all the blessings he gave me physically, a wonderful wife and family and all the possessions, a great church where I can enjoy fellowship and the support of others.

[27 : 47] I'm a failure but God is great. And let's leave with that thought this morning. We're going a few minutes to be taking communion together. We're going to be thinking of what the Lord Jesus has done for us.

Let's do it with humble hearts as we recognize just how miserable, how much of a failure that we've been in many ways in our lives. But let's do it with joyful hearts as we think of what God has done for us and the daily blessings that he is willing to give for us.

And let's make sure that our confidence is in him. Trust and obey was our first point. Let's make sure that we are trusting in him, that we're trusting in Lord Jesus for salvation through his death on the cross, that we're trusting him in our daily lives and that we're being obedient to him as we seek to live for him.

Let's pray together. Father, we thank you for your word to us this morning. We thank you for the psalm which in many ways is quite dark and talks about some really sad periods in the history of your people.

And yet we thank you that shining through it and the things that the psalmist really wants us to focus on as he begins and ends it is the greatness of our God. We thank you for your glory, for your majesty, for your power, and above all we thank you for your love, for the grace that you have shown in sending your son to be the saviour of the world, to be my saviour as I trust in him.

[29 : 21] Help us to recognise our weakness, our inadequacy, but help us too to recognise the saviour who is always there and who is always willing to forgive as we repent and turn to him.

We pray you'll be with us now as we think on his death, as we share together in the bread and the cup, that our hearts may be drawn out in real worship and adoration of him.

We give you our thanks in the name of the Lord Jesus. Amen.