

PSALM 13

¹ How long, LORD? Will you forget me for ever? How long will you hide your face from me?

² How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and day after day have sorrow in my heart? How long will my enemy triumph over me?

³ Look on me and answer, LORD my God. Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death,

⁴ and my enemy will say, 'I have overcome him,' and my foes will rejoice when I fall.

⁵ But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation.

⁶ I will sing the LORD's praise, for he has been good to me.

JOHN 11 verses 1-6, 17- 44

Now a man named Lazarus was ill. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. ² (This Mary, whose brother Lazarus now lay ill, was the same one who poured perfume on the Lord and wiped his feet with her hair.) ³ So the sisters sent word to Jesus, 'Lord, the one you love is ill.' ⁴ When he heard this, Jesus said, 'This illness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it.' ⁵ Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. ⁶ So when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed where he was two more days.

⁷ On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. ¹⁸ Now Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem, ¹⁹ and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother. ²⁰ When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home.

²¹ 'Lord,' Martha said to Jesus, 'if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²² But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask.'

²³ Jesus said to her, 'Your brother will rise again.'

²⁴ Martha answered, 'I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.'

²⁵ Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; ²⁶ and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?'

²⁷ 'Yes, Lord,' she replied, 'I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world.'

²⁸ After she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary aside. 'The Teacher is here,' she said, 'and is asking for you.' ²⁹ When Mary heard this, she got up quickly and went to him. ³⁰ Now Jesus had not yet entered the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. ³¹ When the Jews who had been with Mary in the house, comforting her, noticed how quickly she got up and went out, they followed her, supposing she was going to the tomb to mourn there. ³² When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.'

³³ When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. ³⁴ 'Where have you laid him?' he asked.

'Come and see, Lord,' they replied.

³⁵ Jesus wept.

³⁶ Then the Jews said, 'See how he loved him!'

³⁷ But some of them said, 'Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?'

³⁸ Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. ³⁹ 'Take away the stone,' he said.

'But, Lord,' said Martha, the sister of the dead man, 'by this time there is a bad odour, for he has been there four days.'

⁴⁰ Then Jesus said, 'Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?'

⁴¹ So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, 'Father, I thank you that you have heard me. ⁴² I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me.' ⁴³ When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out!' ⁴⁴ The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth round his face. Jesus said to them, 'Take off the grave clothes and let him go.'

“YOU ARE NEVER ALONE”

5. He is with you in the valley

READING: *John chapter 11 verses 1-6, 17-44*

An aeroplane was going through very rough weather and great turbulence. The Airhostess instructed all the passengers to be careful and fasten their seat belts. The turbulence increased, the plane was going up and down people were shouting and crying. A boy was very cool and not worried about the situation. Finally, the plane landed. Some people nearby asked him why he was not afraid of the situation. He told them “The pilot is my dad.”

Our next miracle or sign from John’s gospel is based around an event which most will be able to relate, and for some, all too recently. The story of Lazarus, Mary and Martha, was a story about real people, facing a real dilemma. Lazarus was ill, and his sisters, Mary and Martha sent word to Jesus to tell him about it but instead of immediately going to his friend’s bedside, Jesus delayed his journey by a couple of days. By the time he did appear at the family’s home, it was too late. Lazarus had died and had been buried in the family tomb for 4 days. Now, although we know the outcome of the story, that Lazarus was raised again, it would be easy to overlook what the sisters were experiencing during those days. Days of waiting; of feeling disappointed that Jesus had not arrived; of grief in the loss of their brother. They were in that “valley of despair”, the “valley of the shadow of death” as the Psalmist put it in ***Psalm 23 verse 4***.

I am sure that there have been times when we have experienced similar feelings to those of Mary and Martha. That feeling of prayers not being answered. The feelings that God has somehow left us. That feeling that, in the great scheme of things, we do not matter. Whilst, I can empathise with those feelings, I am also reminded that in those “valleys” we find ourselves, that God has promised his presence. For each of us, our personal valley could be very different to others around us – grief, concern about health, worries about the future, worries about our families, worries about our church, and we all travel that valley of the shadow of COVID at present.

A few years ago, I decided to climb Pen y fan. It was a lovely summer day when I set off, determined to get to the top. How hard could it be. For those who have done, you will know that there a number of routes, and from the main A470, there are a least 2. I soon began to realise that I had chose the wrong one, following the path up to the left of the Storey Arms. As I reached the top, I thought that the peak of the mountain can’t be too far. But as I reached the top, there was a dip down into a little valley, which meant that there would be a climb up the other side again. I was exhausted and I think that even the local sheep took pity on me, I looked pathetic. As I reached the top of the other side, I could see the peak in the distance, but in order to reach it there were a few more dips and climbs to endure. I was getting very tired. I was aching. Time was going on, but I was determined to get there. Eventually I reached the top. I took in the view, and could not really see all those little valleys I have to dip into and climb out of again. I had done it. I had reached the top. Eventually, came the realisation that I would have to go back down again and choosing the easier path down, content I had achieved that goal.

In life, it is those “valley dips” that can make the journey more difficult. But in order to reach the “mountain top”, there may be valleys we must climb out of, and whilst in those valleys, realise that the mountain is ahead. The key is to keep walking through the valley no matter what because the journey is not yet complete. Mountain top experiences may be good but can easily be all that we look for, but we must not forget that the valley experiences are the ones that shape, discipline and position us where God wants us to be. God blesses us even in the valley. In the midst of depression, failure, and challenges, God moves.

As Lazarus, Mary, Martha, David and each of us, become all too aware, death is the one common reality of all human life. It casts a frightening shadow over us because we are entirely helpless in

its presence. We can struggle with other enemies: pain, suffering, disease, injury; but strength and courage cannot overcome death. It has the final word. The only person who can walk with us through death's dark valley and bring us to the other side, our Divine Shepherd. Despite all we are experiencing, God continues to bless us as the enemy is watching. The enemy can see us, but cannot get to us because our Shepherd is there with His rod to discipline us and quell the enemies attack, and His staff to protect and guard us from all dangers, eventually, in His good time, leading us out of that valley. Like Mary and Martha, we might feel that the timing is all wrong; that our prayers remain unanswered; that the requested help is not there when needed; those feelings of isolation, aloneness.

Have you ever faced a valley where it seemed that you were outnumbered, surrounded, and feeling totally helpless. This is how Israel felt when Ben Hadad returned convinced by a servant that Israel's God was a God of the mountain tops whilst his gods were gods of the valley and that if they could engage Israel in battle in the valley, then Ben Hadad would be victorious (**1 Kings chapter 20**). Israel is so far out-numbered that they look like two small herds of sheep, While Ben Hadad's army cover the whole valley. You could imagine the fear that gripped the hearts of the army of Israel? Discouragement and despair must have filled their minds. Thoughts of giving up. Surrender must have been the main topic of the day. But God was not going to stand for the idea that His presence was limited to the mountain tops. Many times in our lives we find ourselves in the middle of the valley, We feel weak, tired, empty and alone. We feel so far from the presence and the peace of God, and when we call on Him we feel like we get a busy signal. Know today that God is not only the God of the mountain but that He is God of every valley that you will face in your life; those valleys where our faith is put to the test.

In **Psalm 84 verses 5 and 6**, the Psalmist writes of the "valley of Baca". Baca means "a place of weeping", it is a place full of thorns, but the promise is given that God will care for them and bring them through. In **Psalm 30 verse 5**, the promise is "**weeping may remain for a night, but rejoicing comes in the morning.**" In those "valleys", we can find our faith being stretched as we realise in our **John chapter 11** story. Mary and Martha are in a valley of despair. "**If you only....**" they said to Jesus when he did arrive finally. They had done everything right. They had called on Jesus when their brother got sick. It seemed that Jesus was stretching their faith when after saying "**I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die**" he asked Martha "**Do you believe this?**" (**John 11 verses 25 and 26**). In essence, Jesus was telling her, "I am here in the middle of your valley with you. Do you trust me?" He is the Lord of the mountains, but he is also Lord in the valley.

Valleys can also be a place of victory. In (**1 Samuel 17**) we read where Israel stood on the edge of the valley for 40 days listening to Goliath. Fear had gripped their hearts. Depression hung heavy over the army of Israel. They were humiliated, hiding in the rocks. But little David stood that day full of the anointed power of God, and challenged Goliath. The moment the rock hit it's mark victory was heard in the valley and the army of Israel rose up to defeat the mighty Philistine army.

God was their God in the valley that day. Victory comes to those in doubt, yet place their feeble trust in Him. In (**Mark chapter 9**) we read of a man that was in a valley of faltering faith. His son was possessed and the father was tormented as he watched his son being tormented. The disciples had just been on the mountain top with Jesus and witnessed a glorious sight. Despite wanting to stay there and bask in the glory of that place, Jesus led them back down and here they were confronted by this desperate man who asked "**If you can do anything, take pity on us and help us.**" (**Mark 9 verse 22**) and, when Jesus asked him if he believed, went on to say "**I do believe, help me to overcome my unbelief.**" (**verse 24**). What the man was saying is, Jesus I believe as far as my earthly faith will take me, but come alongside me, in the midst of my valley, and extend my faith.

But our main assurance re-echoes that thought we will carry with us throughout this year, a valley is also a place of assurance. No matter how hard it gets, how alone we may feel, we can rest on His promises that He will be with us. ***“Be strong and courageous, Do not be afraid or terrified.....for the Lord your God goes with you; He will never leave you nor forsake you” (Deuteronomy 31 verse 6).***

Sadly, the valleys of life are unavoidable, unpredictable, impartial but they are also temporary. When we do face them refuse to be discouraged; remember God’s promised presence, even if you can’t feel it; rely on His protection.

When Rev Doctor George Campbell Morgan, great preacher, evangelist and Bible teacher, was a young Christian he used to visit several elderly ladies to read the Bible to them. When he came to the end of Matthew’s Gospel, Morgan read, ***“Lo I am with you always, even unto the end of the age”***, He added Isn’t that a wonderful promise? One of the ladies quickly replied “Young man that is not a promise. It’s a fact.”

“When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze. For I am the Lord, your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour” Isaiah 43 verses 2-3)