

3rd March 2024 at Sunday 9.00 am and 10.30 am

WILL GOD MEET ME IN THE VALLEY

Sermon preached by The Revd Dr Tony Martin delivered at Cromwell
Presbyterian Church



READINGS:

Psalm 42

**1 As the deer pants for streams of water,
so my soul pants for you, my God.**

**2 My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.
When can I go and meet with God?**

**3 My tears have been my food
day and night,
while people say to me all day long,
“Where is your God?”**

**4 These things I remember
as I pour out my soul:
how I used to go to the house of God
under the protection of the Mighty One[d]
with shouts of joy and praise
among the festive throng.**

**5 Why, my soul, are you downcast?
Why so disturbed within me?
Put your hope in God,
for I will yet praise him,
my Saviour and my God.**

**6 My soul is downcast within me;
therefore I will remember you
from the land of the Jordan,
the heights of Hermon—from Mount Mizar.**

**7 Deep calls to deep
in the roar of your waterfalls;
all your waves and breakers
have swept over me.**

**8 By day the Lord directs his love,
at night his song is with me—
a prayer to the God of my life.**

**9 I say to God my Rock,
“Why have you forgotten me?
Why must I go about mourning,
oppressed by the enemy?”**

**10 My bones suffer mortal agony
as my foes taunt me,
saying to me all day long,
“Where is your God?”**

11 Why, my soul, are you downcast?

**Why so disturbed within me?
Put your hope in God,
for I will yet praise him,
my Saviour and my God.**

John 16:25-33

25 “Though I have been speaking figuratively, a time is coming when I will no longer use this kind of language but will tell you plainly about my Father. 26 In that day you will ask in my name. I am not saying that I will ask the Father on your behalf. 27 No, the Father himself loves you because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God. 28 I came from the Father and entered the world; now I am leaving the world and going back to the Father.”

29 Then Jesus’ disciples said, “Now you are speaking clearly and without figures of speech. 30 Now we can see that you know all things and that you do not even need to

have anyone ask you questions. This makes us believe that you came from God.”

31 “Do you now believe?” Jesus replied. 32 “A time is coming and in fact has come when you will be scattered, each to your own home. You will leave me all alone. Yet I am not alone, for my Father is with me.

33 “I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.”

INTRODUCTION

1 As the deer pants for streams of water,
so my soul pants for you, my God.

2 My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.
When can I go and meet with God?

This brief verse in Psalm 42 may not be as life-changing as other sentences have been for me, but it has certainly been faith-sustaining. I realized this recently when I noticed just how frequently I return to it and in fact the Psalm is often used in Lent.

Here, I am once again struck by its honesty and simplicity ... describing how one can feel as a believer.

THE LAW OF UNDULATION

Have you heard about “the law of Undulation.”

Undulation is a fancy word for “wave-like rhythm.”

The law of Undulation refers to a permanent feature of human life in our mortal condition.

The book *Screwtape Letters* by CS Lewis derisively refers to human beings as amphibians ... creatures with one foot in the spiritual world (like angels) and one foot in the material world (like animals).

As spirits we belong to the eternal world, but as animals we inhabit time and space.

And it is a law of the spiritual life that “In all areas of our life ... periods of emotional richness are regularly followed by periods of dryness and dullness.”

While our spirits can be directed to an eternal object, our bodies, desires, and imaginations are in continual flux.

The result is undulation — “the repeated return to a level from which we repeatedly fall back, a series of troughs and peaks.”

So, to repeat, in all areas of our life, periods of emotional richness and bodily vitality it seems are regularly followed by periods of dryness, dullness, numbness, and spiritual poverty.

Peaks and Valleys, high places, and troughs.

We might ask, why has God subjected human beings to the law of Undulation? Do you have an answer? Hmm

Fundamentally, I believe, God aims to fill the universe with replicas of himself. He intends for the lives of his image-bearers, to be a creaturely participation in his own life, as our wills are freely conformed to his will.

The Lord wants us to be united to him and yet distinct from him. This is what we variously describe as communion, sanctification, peace with God and so.

And, it is my observation, that troughs, especially spiritual troughs, serve this larger purpose.

At times, in the Christian life, God makes his presence manifest and felt.

The Lord makes himself sensibly present to us, with an emotional sweetness ... that empowers us ... to more easily triumph over temptation.

So, obedience flows from us like ... rivers from a living spring.

Prayer is like breathing ... the most natural and normal overflow of God's felt presence ... in our lives.

These are the peaks of the Christian life.

Oh oh, then come the valleys, the troughs.

God withdraws himself, not in actual fact ... but from our conscious experience ... from our felt reality.

In doing so, the Lord removes the emotional support ... and spiritual incentives ... that made obedience ... seem so natural and effortless.

In these times, God is calling us to carry out our duties, without the emotional richness ... and delight ... that his felt presence provides ... though ... and it seems ironic ... not apart from his sustaining grace.

And in doing so ... we grow into people ... whose wills are more fully conformed ... to his own.

This brings us to the faith-sustaining sentence,

**1 As the deer pants for streams of water,
so my soul pants for you, my God.**

2 My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.

When can I go and meet with God?

We should break these words into parts ... in order ... to understand them better.

We should note a distinction between “desiring God” and “going to meet God.” One is the desire of the heart ... and the other is the activity of one’s life.

This distinction is produced by the law of Undulation.

You see ... I have found ... going to meet God feels hard in the valley.

It is heavy and burdensome ... because the emotional sweetness of God’s presence is not felt.

In these times, we feel divided from ourselves. At one level, there is no heart-felt desire.

We have a spiritual hunger, an emptiness, a deep longing for love, a longing for a touch of the divine ... an intense ... perhaps tearful looking for the Lord.

This is the level of the desire ... those almost instinctive and intuitive emotional reactions ... that are closely tied to our bodies.

At that level, we struggle to do God's will ... because God is sensibly absent.

The Lord's presence is not felt, and so our desires are unfulfilled.

But thankfully, there is another level — the level of reason and will ... that is ... there is intention.

This level is higher than the level of emotions.

Here there is a deep and fundamental commitment ... a deep ... fundamental ... and enduring commitment ... to do God's will.

In such moments, we are like Christ in Gethsemane, saying, "Not my will, but yours be done."

"Not my will," that is, "I don't want to do this; I don't desire to drink this cup."

Nevertheless, at a deeper level ... we say ... "Your will be done."

That is, "I still intend to do your will, and this intention reflects a deeper and more enduring commitment in my life."

The author CS Lewis expresses this division elsewhere ... in a discussion on prayer ... in Letters to Malcolm.

Prayer, he notes, can feel irksome, he says, **“An excuse to omit [prayer] it is never unwelcome” (113). We can be so spiritually lazy at times, can’t we?**

And I do not know about you ... but I find this ... deeply unsettling ... since we were made to ... glorify God ... and enjoy him forever.

So, prayer, loving the Lord and obeying him, should naturally flow from our lives.

But I have found ... sometimes it doesn’t ... it simply doesn’t.

Lewis says **“What can be done for ... or what should be done ... with a rose that dislikes producing roses? Surely it ought to want to?”**

If we were perfected ... Lewis says ... prayer would not be a duty ... but a delight.

But I am not perfect. Are you?

And Lewis knows how to encourage us here:

“I have a notion that what seem our worst prayers may really be, in God’s eyes, our best. Those, I mean, which are least supported by devotional feeling For these, perhaps, being nearly all willpower, come from a deeper level than feeling” (p116)

The prayers we offer when it seems God is absent ... are real prayers indeed.

And our obedience as Christians ... when God seems like he has abandoned us ... is real discipleship indeed.

You then might ask the question ... can we really be God-forsaken? I know there are times when we can feel God-forsaken.

**10 My bones suffer mortal agony
as my foes taunt me,
saying to me all day long,
“Where is your God?”**

Now, returning to CS Lewis and the Screwtape Letters, what frequently smothers our desires, he says ... is that we “look around our universe from which ... every trace of God ... seems to have vanished.”

The “seems to” is crucial here.

Every trace of God hasn't ... actually vanished. Because as the Bible says ... all of reality continually testifies to its Creator.

The heavens perpetually declare the glory of God (Psalm 19:1).

But in the trough, in the valley, our perception is diminished.

Our felt reality ... is often out of sync with reality.

And thus God “seems to” have vanished.

And this “seeming” is potent.

I would say, please do not underestimate the power of appearances, of “seeming’s”. They are real and can be paralysing.

I am thinking of people in Israel, Gaza, Russia, Ukraine, those falsely accused in jail, the persecuted, discriminated, abused, bullied, unemployed, those facing health and disability issues, the lonely, those who have failed ... the list goes on doesn't it.

And so ... one has to say ... for some people God “seems to” have vanished.

And this “seeming” is potent.

But neither must we make this experience ... the reason or author ... of our actions.

SO, HOW SHOULD I RESPOND IN THE VALLEY

So, you might ask, Tony, what should the Christian do in the trough ... or in the valley?

Well, I believe we should begin with honesty.

We should acknowledge the trough.

Name the valley.

If God seems absent, say so. Out loud.

More importantly, say so to God.

The patient in Screwtape ... writes Lewis ... “asks why he has been forsaken.”

And the psalmist says:

**10 My bones suffer mortal agony
as my foes taunt me,
saying to me all day long,
“Where is your God?”**

He directs his observation upward, to God ... who seems to have forsaken him.

In doing so, he follows in a great biblical lineage.

How long, O Lord? Will you forget me ... forever? How long will you hide your face from me? (Psalm 13:1)

Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble? (Psalm 10:1)

O Lord, why do you cast my soul away? Why do you hide your face from me? (Psalm 88:14)

In the face of (seeming) divine absence, faithful saints ... cry out to God and plead, “Why?” and “How long?” and “Arise, O Lord!”

They echo Jesus on the cross, who himself echoed the psalmist: **“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46; Psalm 22:1)**

I believe ... this is what faith looks like in the trough ... in the valley.

And ... “In the face of God’s apparent abandonment, the faithful Christian still obeys.”

The cry of desperation and confusion ... is faith in the face of felt divine absence.

That's why Lewis contends that prayers offered in the state of dryness ... please the Lord ... in a special way.

He writes,

Unsupported by rich communications of the divine presence, lacking the emotional sweetness of the peaks, these prayers come from the deep places of the soul, the heart of hearts, which contains our deepest and most persistent longings and commitments.

And our response ... can crescendo ... with these final three words: **“and still obeys.”**

In the absence of emotional desire, in the face of God's apparent abandonment, the faithful Christian still obeys.

You see, I believe, God's felt absence is never an excuse for sin. The poverty of our feelings, the

dryness ... and the dullness of our sensibilities ...
these can never be used to justify disobedience.

And make no mistake: that is the demonic stratagem in the troughs and the valleys ... to prey upon our experience of divine absence ... in order to lead us to abandon God altogether.

Which is why the satanic cause ... is never more in danger ... than when every sensible support has been knocked out ... and we still cling to Jesus anyway.

If we, apart from eager desire to do God's will ... and with God's felt absence pressing upon us ... still cling to Jesus ... and seek to walk in his light ... what else can the devil do?

Are you feeling spiritually oppressed by Satan?

Do you feel that the Lord seems absent?

Then cry to the Lord, cling to Jesus, walk in faithful obedience ... and the roaring lion of the devil ... will leave you ... and will leave the church.

Even more than that, I can joyfully confess ... such faithful obedience ... over time ... and through the valley of shadows ... is frequently the pathway to renewed experiences ... of God's presence.

Faithfulness to the Lord ... even when he seems absent ... will ultimately lead to the delight of the Lord's presence.

Why, my soul, are you downcast?

Why so disturbed within me?

Put your hope in God,

for I will yet praise him,

my Saviour and my God.

AMEN.