

IN THE MESS

GOD, DAVID, YOU AND ME

Today we've come to the end of the series looking into the life of David - 'In the Mess'. It has been a roller coaster of a story: David has had many triumphs but he has also had his fair share of troubles. He has had his highs and his lows.

The high when Samuel came to his lowly family and chose David, the youngest shepherd son to be anointed as the next king. The high of his confrontation with Goliath the Philistine, killing a huge strong man with a single sling shot, and then becoming a national hero. The thrill of serving in king Saul's court, of marrying Saul's daughter and being befriended by Saul's son Jonathan. The low of Saul growing jealous of his success and popularity. The terror as Saul attempts to kill him, and then fleeing and narrowly but consistently eluding the bloodthirsty king. The high when he was crowned king over Judah, tempered with the low that Ish-bosheth was crowned king over Israel and after Ish-bosheth was murdered, the high of the Israelites asking David to reign over them as well. The low when David's plan to build a temple in Jerusalem was vetoed by God. But the high when God then promises David that he would have a son to rule after him; and his son would build the temple; and that the throne occupied by

David's lineage and would be established forever; and God would never take His mercy from David's house. The highs when he led Israel to victory over many of the enemy nations that surrounded them. The mixed highs and lows when he lusts for the beautiful Bathsheba, commits adultery with her, and then has her husband murdered. The depths of despair when David's firstborn son, Amnon, rapes his half-sister, Tamar. And when Absalom leads a revolt against David, and he is forced out of Jerusalem, and Absalom sets himself up as king for a short time. The short-lived high when the usurper is overthrown, only to be followed by the grief when against David's wishes he is killed and David mourns his fallen son. Ian told us that story two weeks ago. The lows continued and a general feeling of unrest plagued the remainder of David's reign. The men of Israel threatened to split from Judah, and David had to suppress further uprisings. □

Roller coaster? More like a Big Dipper!

You've listened to some of the stories and there are many more that haven't been told but you may have read them in these two books of Samuel.

And so as we come to the last part of 2 Samuel we get two psalms in chapters 22 and 23, both of which are attributed to David himself. We are going to look at chapter 22 today.

This psalm is considered as one of the great psalms of David. It is

an intensely personal record of his life to that point and it's a song about how David saw God working in his life 'in the mess'. And we've seen what a mess it was at times!

David was a national treasure. The story of his life is also, to some extent, the story of the Israelite nation at that time. His experience, his understanding of who God was and how he worked was also a model for how the Israelites viewed their God. For this reason the psalm was not just one that David wrote and kept to himself as a personal journal, to remind him of his journey with God. It was handed over to the chief musician, the choirmaster, the director of worship in the temple for public worship. For that reason we find chapter 22 of 2 Samuel almost word for word in Psalm 18 – there are a few minor changes but it is ostensibly the same words.

So we can consider that not only is this a personal account of how David saw his God, but it is also helpful for us too, to explore how we see God in our lives.

Perhaps the most helpful thing to do before we look into what David actual said, and how he felt about God, is to get into a 'time machine' and go back in history. We need to set the dial on our time machine to about minus 3,000 years. How did people live 3,000 years ago? What did they think about life and the world around them? What were their socially accepted norms? How did

they view God, or did they in fact view many gods? Where did their God live, and what did he expect from them? I say HE because it is already clear from the Bible that they had decided God was MALE and should be addressed as HE. If you think I'm being a bit heretical – I'm not trying to be, but you can see how important it is to understand what their 'World View' was in order to make sense of what they said about God.

Chapter 22 is pretty long – 51 verses long, so I'm not going to read it all through now. But I will be referring to verses as I go along so please have your Bibles open to the right place as we go along or if you're high-tech turn on your Smartphone Bible app!

This psalm of David is packed full with images of the things that reminded him of God and the way God worked in his life. David's World View wasn't conditioned by what we know of God through the whole Bible, especially the revelations that Jesus brought through his coming, his life and his death. The life for people in David's time was stark, hard, often cruel if we were to judge them by our standards. Their knowledge of the world around them (we would call it science) was extremely basic and in many case just plain wrong – a flat Earth would be just one obvious example! God lived in the heavens and the heavens were several thousand feet up above the clouds. When it stormed, with thunder and lightening, God was speaking and he was angry! Gods protection was in the caves in which they sheltered and God's help was

shown in their strength and victory in battle.

When David wrote his psalm he was able to see God in everything around him and in everything he did. We might smile a bit at that today but probably we shouldn't! In our sophisticated world we think we are so clever! But we probably miss God in everything around us and don't notice him at all in everything we do! So, here we have David looking back over his triumphs and troubles and writing a very personal reflective song to God. The God whom he knew had been with him through everything that had gone on. The God who gave him the strength for all his exploits. The God who had protected him when he was in extreme danger.

Commentators don't agree on when David wrote this psalm. Some say it was at the time he had been installed as king over Judah, but not yet over all Israel. And he was there looking down over his triumph and new status as king and assessing his life so far – how God had led him and kept him.

Others believe it was after the incident with Bathsheba, when he was chastened by God for his awful sinfulness and fell back on the gracious forgiveness of God.

Still others see it as David looking back over a long journey from shepherd to king – nearing the end of his life.

Although it might be interesting to line up the various images with actual events in his life, the timing doesn't really matter. What matters is how David recognised and responded to God – working in the mess of his life. Sometimes the mess created by those around him, sometimes the mess brought about by his enemies, and often the mess he made himself by his own choices and decisions. But he knew that God was there all the time. And he was reflecting back at God's constant goodness to him at some significant point. He might well have used this personal psalm of reflection and praise at a number of points in his life.

We can do that. We may know God is with us all the time but sometimes there are significant points in our lives when it's helpful to look back and take stock. Maybe at the end of an academic year or at the end of an academic course. Maybe when we are about to start a new job. Or entering a new relationship – getting engaged or getting married. Perhaps changing career or moving home. Our children going off to university or leaving home. Maybe when we are entering retirement.

If you were looking back at such a time, what sort of a journey has it been like? Have you been through a few scrapes? Have there been times in your life when you could reach out your hand and almost touch God? And other times when you could scream at the top of your voice and be sure God couldn't hear – or didn't want to listen? Have you had your victories – personal successes

and you were sure God gave you the protection, strength or the wisdom? Is your journey like a roller coaster – or even a Big Dipper? Could you sing a song about it and see God in the big dipper carriage next to you as you climb up the track to the summit and then plummet down to the bottom leaving your stomach several yards behind you!

Lets look at what David had to say about his big dipper journey.

Lets read the first part of this chapter 22:

1 David sang to the LORD the words of this song when the LORD delivered him from the hand of all his enemies and from the hand of Saul. 2 He said: "The LORD is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer; 3 my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield and the horn of my salvation. □ He is my stronghold, my refuge and my saviour — from violent people you save me.

The psalm begins with David's praise to God for who He is - his refuge. David uses a handful of symbols: David speaks of God as his place of safety. He is David's rock, some versions call it his lofty crag. No doubt David had spent much of his time standing up on such crags, looking down from the lofty heights, knowing that he was virtually inaccessible to his enemies. He saw God in those rocks. He knew God was the solid crag under his feet. He knew it was God who had made him unassailable in that strong place. God is David's "fortress" and his "stronghold." He is David's "shield," and the "horn of his salvation."

Rocks, crags, fortresses, strongholds, shields – these were the ordinary things in David’s life. But he could see something extraordinary in them! The extraordinary in the ordinary – we’ve heard that somewhere before haven’t we? Ian has referred to it in the past as “the art of noticing”. The art of looking at the everyday things of life and seeing God in them – that’s what David was doing.

But these are not mere images; these are the very means God employed to save David's life from the hand of his enemies. David had to hide from King Saul many times. David had to hide from his other enemies too. David hid behind those large rocks. He hid in caves in the hills. He hid inside towns that had strong walls round them. He hid in buildings. He was safe in those places. However, David knew that his real security was with the Lord.

And in this psalm, David urges us to look behind these means, which God employed - to God Himself. It is God who delivers; it is God who is our protector and deliverer. God is our place of safety.

So the question for us might be: where do we feel safe, where do we feel protected? Is it in our own caves, or on our own rocks and craggy places? Our work: is God there, does he give us strength and protection? Our relationships: is God part of those – do they become a source of strength and safety? The life adventures we might go on: do we know God is with us, sustaining us and

protecting us?

In the next 40 or so verses David develops lots of powerful images about how God had saved him. Some of the language may seem a bit strange to us, indeed some of it may seem almost inappropriate to our understanding of a loving God. David talks about how God had helped him – actually this is how David saw God's salvation.

30 ... with my God I can scale a wall.

The living bible says I can leap over a wall. Well there were certainly occasions when David had to literally scale the walls of the city to be successful in his attacks.

34 He makes my feet like the feet of a deer; he causes me to stand on the heights.

A deer walks fearlessly and with great agility in the highest rocky parts, leaping over gaps and finding places of safety. □ Exactly as David had to do - and he saw God giving him the physical strength to do it.

35 He trains my hands for battle; my arms can bend a bow of bronze. □

This wasn't any normal bow – difficult enough as that would have been to use. This was a Bronze Bow. One of their most advanced weapons, only the toughest guy would use that one – and God gave David the strength for that task. Then David talks about the things God enabled him to do:

38 "I pursued my enemies and crushed them; I did not turn back till they were destroyed. □

39 I crushed them completely, and they could not rise; they fell beneath my feet. □

41 You made my enemies turn their backs in flight, and I destroyed my foes.

43 I beat them as fine as the dust of the earth; I pounded and trampled them like mud in the streets.

This psalm is witness to how God equipped David to do God's work. David in action. David infused with the energy to do the work of God, his 'kingwork'. But when we look at the actual work David did, we're probably shocked: David's primary work is war. Most of the work that David exalts in - because God makes it possible for him to do it - involves killing people and features weapons and fighting.

This is a very difficult paradox for us to understand. We would probably find it completely out of step with our viewpoint of what God would do for us! But before we become critical of David's thirst for blood and violence, let's go back to what we said about the time and place of this psalm. The world view under which David lived was made up to a large part by Philistine culture and Canaanite morality – which is to say violence and sex. This is what Eugene Peterson has to say about it: *'Leap Over a Wall P214/215.*

We are told that David was a man after God's heart. We have

seen that he was a man who was at times both passionate for God and yet failed to meet his full potential. He was a man who lived in a messy world, found himself very often in a mess and sometimes created a mess himself. And yet he saw God's salvation! He could say at the end of this psalm:

*47 "The LORD lives! Praise be to my Rock!
□ Exalted be my God, the Rock, my Savior! □...□ 49
who sets me free ... □*

The David story is a Gospel story. God doing for David what David could never do for himself. A sinner saved. It's a story that gets completed in the Jesus story, which features God seeking the sick, the rejected and the lost. Not only is this psalm about David's life – it's looking forward to Jesus. The Lord Jesus Christ is seen in two parts of 2 Samuel. Firstly we meet it in the Covenant promise made to David in 2 Samuel 7:16:

"Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever"

And years later this was to be spoken to a teenage girl who had become pregnant by the Holy Spirit in way neither she nor others really understood. We read these familiar words in Luke when the angel appeared to Mary to announce Jesus' birth: Luke 1:31-33

"He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his

kingdom will never end."

Christ is the fulfilment of the Covenant to David. He is the Son of God in the line of David who will reign forever. David praised God in this psalm as his saviour and rock. And so we see the same in Christ who perfectly fulfilled this promise to David. Luke records in his Gospel:

2:11 Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.

So let's get back in our time machine set in David's era and this time press the forward button about a thousand years and meet another man who knew a lot about rocks and stones. He should do, because he was named after a rock – Peter. Jesus told him once – ‘upon this rock I will build my church’. But although Peter might have been part of the means of building the church, he certainly knew God who established it.

In fact Jesus, was actually the rock on which the church was built. Peter wrote this in his first letter, referring to Jesus: 1 Peter 2:7–9

7 Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe,

“The stone the builders rejected

has become the capstone,

8 and,

“A stone that causes men to stumble

and a rock that makes them fall.”

And Peter's contemporary Paul wrote to the Corinthians 1 Cor 10
v 4

For I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact, brothers, that our forefathers were all under the cloud and that they all passed through the sea. 2 They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. 3 They all ate the same spiritual food 4 and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ.

Christ is our rock. Christ is our lofty crag. Christ is the high ground under our feet that keeps us safe. And Christ is the natural end to our story of David.

David lived in the mess and knew God working in the mess. Christ was born into the mess. We are now in the advent period, and when we consider the birth of Christ we see the real story of God working in the mess. Not just working in the mess of broken lives but being part of it, living it, experiencing it, suffering it and dying in it. Why? To redeem it, and demonstrate for all time that we don't live this life alone but we have a saviour who is truly our rock.