

Psalm 107

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Date: 30 July 2006

Preacher: Fergus MacDonald

[0 : 00] Sometimes when we think of the Bible, we think of a book of ideas. But natural facts, although the Bible contains many ideas, most of these ideas are presented with pictorial language.

They're presented not as abstract concepts, but as verbal images, which stimulate our imagination and help us to understand what the meaning of the message is.

The Bible is, after all, the book of humanity. It is not the book for the educated, although, of course, there is more in the Bible than all the educated people in the world can absorb.

But the Bible is essentially not a book for the specialist. The Bible is a book for the ordinary person. And that is why I think that its basic structure is a structure of a story or a narrative.

And it follows that story from the creation of the world to the consummation in the book of Revelation. There is a line running there, a story. And all of us can identify with that because our lives are a story.

[1 : 18] Our lives have a narrative shape. We think in terms of the journey that we have travelled. We think in terms of the route that we have followed.

And when we come to the Bible, we can readily understand the main thrust of what is being said. Now, within this narrative framework of the Bible, we have a lot of verbal images, of verbal pictures being presented to us.

And we have a very good example of that in this psalm, which we're singing our way through most of this evening.

In this psalm, there are presented to us not simply words, but four graphic pictures that are there to arrest and to stimulate our imagination and to enable us to engage with the text and to help us to interact with it through our minds and through our imagination.

Each image is, in the NIV translation, introduced by the word *some* and the final image with the word *others*.

[2 : 41] We see this particularly in verse 6, verse 13, verse 19, and verse 28. Each of these verses introduces a new picture, a new image.

The message is basically the same that is being repeated using a different image or a different picture. It's like a joiner who's hammering a nail in.

It needs to be hammered more than once. And what the psalmist is doing here is he's making this point four times using these very vivid pictures.

And each, the first picture is the picture of a group of people who are lost in the desert in verses 4 to 9. Then we move on in verses 10 to 16 of a group of people in prison then in verses 17 to 22 a group of people who are mortally ill.

Some terrible disease or illness has afflicted them. And then in verses 23 to 33 we have a group of sailors caught up in a hurricane. Now these are all very different images that the message, the message of each is virtually is virtually identical.

[4 : 03] Because we read in each of these that the people cried out to the Lord. They cried out to the Lord in verse 16, 13, 19 and 28.

That is repeated. And similarly, they are exalted exhorted to give thanks to the Lord in verses 8, 15, 21 and 31.

And so we have these two two comments running right through these four pictures like a ribbon which is holding them together.

All of these three groups cried out to the Lord and each group is urged to give thanks to the Lord for his wonderful deeds and his great mercy.

And so we have here these four graphic pictures which tell us that those who cry out to the Lord will be heard and the Lord will respond.

[5 : 10] Now this psalm was written many centuries ago as a psalm about the experience of the people of God in the Old Testament. And yet the experience that this psalm recounts and portrays in this pictorial fashion is an experience which has been replicated in the lives of countless millions of men and women.

In fact, we live in an age in which probably there are more people today in the world at this particular point of time than at any other time in history who can sing this psalm and sing it from their heart and say, this psalm is true of me.

This psalm is my story. The four pictures that are presented here are pictures of my journey, of my narrative, of my life, of my story.

And so, this is a psalm which is relevant, I believe, today. And it demonstrates what God can do if we cry to him.

If we come to him, faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God. We read in the Paul's letter to the Romans. And it is as people hear this visual message, verbal message of the gospel and they respond in faith that the Lord hears them and he delivers them and he transforms their lives and he lifts them up and brings them into a new relationship with him.

[6 : 42] So, I'd like this evening just to look at each of these images briefly and to illustrate from today's world how these images are being reenacted in the experience of men and women.

Now, I want to draw upon a series of case studies which I've gathered from information that I've culled from the network of Bible Society communication.

And all of these stories are stories which have happened this year or last year. They are stories of today. And they demonstrate that the gospel is the power of God today.

The gospel is not something simply historical. It is something contemporary. It is the power of God. So, let us look first of all in verses 4 to 9 to the picture of people lost in the desert.

Some wandered in desert wastelands finding no way to a city where they could settle. This, of course, is a picture. It always was a picture.

[7 : 52] It's meant to be a picture. And it's certainly a picture that applies to people in the 21st century because one of the key words that philosophers and sociologists and other people use to describe life today is the word nomad.

We are nomads wandering from one oasis to another. Life has no aim. Life has no purpose.

There's nothing linear in our lives. We simply move from one day to another, from one situation to another situation. We are nomads.

We live an aimless life. A few weeks ago I heard a leading academic in Scotland say that today people can no longer be pilgrims.

people are essentially nomads. The message of this time is that people can become pilgrims. That they can be delivered from wandering in the desert.

[9 : 02] They can be delivered from going round and round in circles. That if they cry to the Lord he will hear their cry and he will deliver them.

Symptoms of this aimlessness, this lack of purpose in life is evident all around us. We see it in the literature of today. We see it often in the music of today.

We see it in the binge drinking of today, in drug abuse. There are lots and lots of illustrations of this aimlessness which is afflicting the human race because of sin.

Let me share with you the experience of a young man called Dennis. A 17 year old teenager really from the country of Belarus.

One of the former countries within the Soviet Union. Dennis is a resident in a rehabilitation centre for drug addicts and alcoholics that is run by Christians in his country.

[10 : 17] There, through a gradual process of detoxification, practical training, and social reintegration, it achieves a 75% success rate.

Now, this is Dennis' testimony. God has been good to me here, he says, and he goes on to explain how after becoming an addict at an early age, he now is looking to live a new life.

Let me just quote what he says. My mother is a Christian and I attended Sunday school. I didn't make any friends there, though. Instead, my friends were from families with alcoholism and other problems, and they introduced me to sniffing glue and trying stronger drugs.

I soon began to steal in order to pay for my addiction. My parent found out and became very angry. Sometimes I ran away from home, but my mother never gave up on me.

She spoke to the pastor, and he found a place for me here, in this center. I give special thanks to God for my mother. Her love for me was so great that she never abandoned me.

[11 : 30] I also thank the Bible Society for supplying Bibles that help us to become familiar with God's love. There's one example of a young man, a late teenager, who was like that group of people wandering in the desert, going from one drug binge to another.

prayer. He cried out to the Lord, and the Lord delivered him. The Lord brought him through. The gospel is still today the power of God and for salvation.

The second image that we have in the psalm is the image of people in prison. We see this, especially from verse 10 onward, sunset and darkness and the deepest gloom, prisoners suffering in iron chains, while they rebelled against the words of God and despised the counsel of the Most High.

Prison is a very real experience for people in many countries of the world today. But we give God thanks that God has not abandoned people in prison.

God is working through prison, through the ministry of chaplains, the ministry of prison visitors, and of others who are seeking to share the good news with those who are in prison.

[13 : 02] I want to share with you the story of another person, an older person, but also from the former Soviet Union, from the country of Kazakhstan, that large country in Central Asia, larger than Western Europe, from which the Russians still launched their spacecraft.

This man's name is Balodja. He was the leader of a gang, a criminal gang, a well-known criminal gang in the city of Akhobi in Western Kazakhstan.

As a result of his activities, he was sent to prison. One day, shortly after being released from prison, he went to the Bible Society shop in that city.

He told the shop manager that he'd been released from prison just one month earlier and he wanted to buy a Bible for himself. He explained how several years before he had been a gang leader and as such he controlled a large group of people who were involved in a series of different types of crimes.

At that time he was very pleased with his life, which combined good income with spending time with his wife and his children. And from time to time he and his associates held parties.

[14 : 20] And at one of these parties he overheard his son, a small son of nine years of age, proudly telling somebody that when he grew up he was going to be a gang leader like his dad.

Now the lodger was shaken by that. He became very concerned about his son. Just shortly after that he was caught and imprisoned.

And in prison he became ill with pluri-sy and always died. But one day as he lay in the prison hospital, a man visited the war holding a book in his hand.

He came to the lodger's bed. And that man talked with him about God's love and forgiveness and told him the gospel and led him to give his life to Christ.

He still had several years of his prison sentence to serve. But when he after that had been fulfilled he was released and returned to his native city where previously he had terrified the residents.

[15 : 30] As he told his story to the shop manager he told him that he now attends church regularly with his daughter. He hopes that his son will soon begin also to attend.

And his former associates and prime were very surprised by the change in his life and some of them had also become Christians. And before he left with his own copy of the Bible he opened it at Psalm 25 and read that verse where we ask the Lord to forgive the sins that we did when we were young.

So God is at work today touching the lives of those who are in literal prisons as well as in psychological prisons. Those who have a sense of living in bondage to self and to sin.

The gospel is today still the power of God. Those who are shut up in the prisons where the literal or figurative can be delivered by the Christ who sets men and women free.

In the book of Revelation we read that Christ has loosed us from our sins. And that's what Christ has done for Bologna. And that's what he is doing for countless other people today.

[17 : 02] And if he has not yet done it for you he can do it. And he can do it tonight. He can set you free from that spiritual prison in which you are bound to sin and to evil and to death.

He can set you free and deliver you. He can loose you from your sin. But then the third picture that we have here in verses 17 to 22 is the picture of a group of people who are afflicted by a deadly illness.

This becomes quite clear as we read these. This was an illness which they brought upon themselves. As a result they loathed all foods and drew near to the gates of death. It appeared to be a mortal illness. But then they cried to the Lord in their trouble and he saved them from their distress. He sent forth his word and healed them and rescued them from the grave. God is reaching men and women today who are afflicted. One of the curses of our age is the HIV AIDS epidemic or pandemic.

[18 : 27] This is particularly true in many African countries. where sadly so many so many young people young adults are dying.

A leader of the church in Nigeria told me some years ago he said Africa is the continent where the old are burying the young. And in years to come there is going to be an enormous need to minister to orphans in Africa because of AIDS.

people who are not going to be a terrible affliction that is. Sometimes that affliction touches the lives of people.

It is not their fault. Wives can be infected by their husbands, often are, or through blood transfusion. people. But God is at work among AIDS sufferers in Africa.

God's word is coming alive in the experience of many of them. The third person I want to tell you about tonight is a young lady from the country of Congo. She's called Nancy.

[19 : 41] Congo is the third largest country in Africa where at least one million people are living with the HIV AIDS condition. The Bible societies in that country and throughout Africa are helping the churches by producing what they call a Samaritan program, a good Samaritan program, which encourages Christians to share the gospel with AIDS sufferers.

The problem in Africa is that so often AIDS is considered to be what leprosy was in the ancient world. No one wants to admit that they have AIDS. They call it something else.

They call it pneumonia. They call it TB. And this ministry of the Good Samaritan program is aimed to help people to be realistic and to help the churches to help their neighbor and to demonstrate God's love in a practical way.

Nancy, as I said, lives in the Congo. Let her tell us her own story. She tells us I'm 29 years old. I buried my only child in July 2004 and in March last year I buried my husband. She goes on to tell us that it is nearly three years since she, a university graduate, was diagnosed as HIV positive.

[21 : 10] I was very upset, she says, and I was crying a lot. Any person would. I wrestled with God and I wondered if he might be punishing me.

When my status became known, I began to share my challenges with others. People reached out and started to encourage me. That helped me toward accepting my status.

She goes on in her story to tell, to describe the first time she gave her testimony in public. She says, it was God who gave me the strength to testify in front of many people.

He helped me to overcome the stigma and the social rejection I experienced. He is my anchor and therefore I am not ashamed. I am not afraid to continue living.

My example shows that being HIV positive does not mean that you are dead. God is working through his word to catch the lives of those who have been traumatized by AIDS, by rape, by war in many African countries.

[22 : 22] I recently met with some missionaries who were working with the weekly Bible translators in Africa. They are fulfilling what they call a trauma healing ministry.

And they told me how they are using the Psalms of Lament, which we have in our Bibles. One third of the Psalms are Psalms of Lament, or Lament Psalms. And they are using these to help women who have been raped, or people who are suffering from AIDS, to bring their pain to God, and to hand it over to him, and to know that deliverance that comes when the people call to the Lord for help.

In a quite remarkable way, these ancient Psalms from the Old Testament are delivering AIDS sufferers and rape victims in Africa today. What a remarkable testimony to the power of God's word, to its cross-cultural influence.

today. In Africa, there are people who are crying out to the Lord, and he's hearing them and delivering them. The final picture that we have here is the picture of some sailors caught in a hurricane, caught in a natural disaster.

We see that in verses 23 to 33, those going, earning the living on the sea. and suddenly, the ship being struck by a violent hurricane.

[23 : 57] We live in a world in which we seem to be becoming more aware that this world is a world of natural disasters. They're certainly by new beings uncommon.

I want to share with you the testimony of someone who came to faith as a result of what is probably the greatest natural disaster of our time, the tsunami of 2004, that hit the shores of Indonesia, Thailand, India, Sri Lanka, and other countries with devastating results that shocked us all.

This is a story about a person called Nhi M. He's Thai. He's a member of the Yurok Lawoy people group in Thailand.

He survived the tsunami. By profession he's a fisherman. His boat and fishing equipment were swept away. But he miraculously survived.

Before the tsunami struck, Nhi M. had no interest in Christianity. Although he did have a cousin, 180 miles away, who had become a Christian. But he felt that Christianity had no relevance for him.

[25 : 14] He had all he needed and he faithfully took part in the floating boat festival, which was designed to honour the ancestors and symbolically float away misfortune. However, following the devastation of the tsunami, something changed in Nhi M.

The world was not as he thought it to be. Danger was everywhere. And from Christians from a church in the nearby mainland city of Tran, came to his village to help.

Nhi M. first of all was embarrassed. Why were these people helping him to get a new boat and fishing equipment, he asked. But he was curious, and he listened to these visitors talking about Jesus, and how it was he who was inspiring them to do what they were doing to help devastated fishermen and their families, Christians like Nhi M.

He listened very carefully. And when these Christians talked about the hope they had in God, he began to listen.

Shortly after that, Nhi M. became very ill with a liver disease, and the Christians visited him and prayed for his healing. God heard their prayers, and he quickly recovered and felt very strongly that it was God who had restored him to life.

[26 : 41] And in response, he gave his life to Christ, and is today being trained to become an elder in his village. He hosts a weekly Bible study in his house, and is keen to tell others about his new faith.

Now, Niam is just one of hundreds of people from his people group, the Urak Lawoi people, who have become Christians since the tsunami. A remarkable change has taken place among the tribal group that in the past was one of the most resistant people groups in Thailand to the gospel.

The first missionaries arrived in 1965, but it was not until ten years later that the first person expressed faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. But today, following the tsunami, there is a continual stream of people coming to faith, already there are plans to extend the church building on his island.

And so God, in a quite remarkable way, is speaking to people like E.M., whose lives are suddenly turned upside down by some natural disaster.

And like these men in this verbal picture that we have in the psalm, they cry out to the Lord and the Lord hears them and delivers them. And so this message, this word, this gospel, is a message of power today.

[28 : 19] And today, God hears the cry of ordinary people like Dennis, like Volodja, like Nancy, like me, M. people who find themselves in perplexity, in prison, in pain, and in peril.

He reaches out to them through his word, and when they cry out to him, he hears them and he delivers them. And they, each of these four people I've shared with you tonight, this day, have worshipped the Lord and given thanks to him, and have done what this psalm urges them to do, where it says, let them give thanks to the Lord for his unfailing love, and for his wonderful deeds for human beings.

These are four, only four, there are many more, who are giving thanks to the Lord tonight. People who a year ago, 18 months ago, two years ago, had no hope, couldn't care less, considered the gospel to be relevant, or didn't know anything about it.

God's word is at work in the world today. And that word which is at work in Belarus, in Kazakhstan, in Congo, and in Thailand, is the same word that we have gathered around tonight.

And the God who intervened in these four lives is the God who is present with us tonight. He is the God who can come into your life.

[29 : 54] He is the God who can deliver you from whatever your affliction is, whatever your need is, whatever manifestation sin has in your life. God can deliver you from his guilt and from his power.

This is the God whose word tells us that if we cry to him, we'll deliver us and give us every reason in the world to thank him for his love and for his mercy.

I pray that tonight there may be someone here in this building in this service, someone whose life God has spoken to tonight, who has seen themselves reflected in these verbal pictures, these four graphic images that are presented to us in the sand, and who have heard echoes of their own experience in one or more of these four people that we've heard of from different parts of the world. God, I want to say to you tonight, that if you cry to the Lord, he will hear you and he will deliver you. So why did you cry to the Lord now?

Ask him to do what he has promised to do, to deliver you and to save you. Those who call upon the name of the Lord will be saved.

[31 : 16] let's pray together.