

SERMON – 3/4/22
'Lead us not into temptation'

Psalm 6:1-10

'My soul is in deep anguish. How long, LORD, how long?' (Ps.6:3)

Do you ever feel as if you are in the wars? I'm sure you do, because most of us have been there at one time or another, but I wonder if you have ever thought more deeply about where life's struggles come from and where they may be leading us.

Over these last few weeks as we have walked with Jesus towards the Cross which looms ever larger before us as Easter draws near, we have been reflecting on phrases from the Lord's Prayer and on the Psalms which would have nourished Jesus' own prayer life. As we come today to consider the prayer 'Lead us not into temptation' we are reminded that in the midst of His own temptations Jesus took up phrases from the Scriptures, what Paul will later call, 'the sword of the Spirit' to arm Him against the Devil's schemes, and we are encouraged to do the same ourselves as we too seek to put on the whole armour of God in the spiritual battle that is going on around us and within us as we seek to follow Jesus today.

In our psalm this morning we find King David in a bit of a state and I think most of us can relate to the kind of things he says to God in prayer. "I am faint, he says, Lord, heal me for my bones are in agony." (v.2) Perhaps his struggles are *physical* ones – a literal battle (because he was involved in plenty of them) or a battle with illness – or perhaps there is a *spiritual* dimension to his struggle - "My *soul* is in deep anguish, he prays. How long, O Lord, how long?" (v.3) Have you ever prayed like that?

In a sense it doesn't matter what the nature of the battle is for physical and spiritual struggles are often intertwined. A person whose body is wracked with pain or eaten with disease is very likely to be going through the mill spiritually and emotionally as well. Equally a person who is afflicted by spiritual trials and who is in turmoil over questions of faith is also quite likely to exhibit physical symptoms too. Have you never wept until your eyes hurt? The psalmist did. Have you ever ached in the pit of your

stomach or felt your bones like lead weights? The psalmist did. When you are in the wars, things can often seem to spiral downwards and the prospect quickly begins to look bleak and that is where we are taken in this psalm. "Who praises you from the grave?" (v.5) David asks the Lord, and similarly the apostle Paul writes to the Corinthians about a time of struggle when he too "despaired even of life" and felt in his heart "the sentence of death." (2 Cor.1:8,9)

So how do we resist temptation and prevent ourselves from getting overtaken by a spirit of defeat? I think the psalm that we have read this morning shows us that different perceptions and different perspectives on our circumstances can easily lead us in very different directions.

To begin with the psalmist asks, "Lord, do not rebuke me in your anger or discipline me in your wrath." (v.1) It's as if David considers that his affliction is some kind of vindictive punishment from God for past misdemeanours. Perhaps he's not even sure what he is meant to have done – unlike in Psalm 51 that we looked at last week he certainly makes no move here to ask God's forgiveness. All he wants is for the trouble to stop – 'How long, Lord, how long?' (v.3) – but maybe David thinks his trouble has come from God and that it is up to God alone to put a stop to it.

In this context I am reminded of some incredibly helpful verses in the opening chapter of the Letter of James where we are rebuked for that kind of thinking. "When tempted, writes James, no one should say, "God is tempting me." For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed." (James 1:13-14) Paul also writes to the Corinthians: "God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you *are* tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it." (1 Cor.10:13)

How do *you* perceive the trouble you find yourself in? Do you think of it as the work of an angry and vindictive God who has picked on you as a kind of sport? Is it something that has fallen

on you unjustly, something for which you share no responsibility at all?

Thankfully David can also see his situation from a different perspective. "Turn, LORD, and deliver me; save me because of your unfailing love." (v.4) God is the God of mercy, the God of perfect justice and if our troubles *are* from Him then they are the righteous discipline of a loving parent whose desire is that we should be led in the right paths. Perhaps we need to take time to consider whether our predicament may be traced back at least in part to our own actions, to a time when we made a wrong choice and wandered from the path, refusing to listen to the Good Shepherd calling us back into His way and to the safety of the fold. If I feel like crying with the psalmist: 'My soul is in deep anguish. How long, LORD, how long?' Perhaps I need to turn it round and hear God say to me, 'How long, Alan, how long?'

We read of Jesus in the deep anguish of the days before He faced the Cross: "Now my soul is troubled, and what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name!" (John 12:27-28) And when days had become hours and He wrestled with God in prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, He said to His disciples: "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me." Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will." Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. "Couldn't you men keep watch with me for one hour?" he asked Peter. "Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak."

You see, for most of us, if we reach the actual moment when temptation is there before us and we have not prepared for it beforehand, then we are already halfway down the slippery slope. Victory over temptation is to be found not so much in the heat of the moment but in those times we spend steeping ourselves in God's Word, equipping ourselves to use this sword of the Spirit which we have been given, and praying in the cool light of day as Jesus taught us: "Lead us not into temptation."

The older I get the more I realise that we need to learn a lot more about God's timing and to get more in step with His purposes. As we cry to God with the people of Ukraine at this time 'How long, Lord, how long?' we need to remember that the current conflict has not brewed up overnight. We may wonder to ourselves where God is in the midst of it but God has been there since before the beginning.

Yesterday I received my copy of the Scottish Bible Society magazine and in it I was humbled to read that since the fall of communism in 1991, in a country with a population of 44 million, the Ukrainian Bible Society has distributed no fewer than 10 million copies of the Bible. (Imagine one in four people in *our* country asking for a Bible). I also read the account of Adrian Armstrong from the Scottish Bible Society who only a few weeks ago, and before anyone knew what was about to unfold, was at a gathering in Kyiv for Ukrainian church leaders organised by the Bible Society there. One of the speakers was the head of the recently established chaplaincy service of the Ukrainian army. He himself had been an accomplished army officer during the Soviet era and he told the gathering that while researching his PhD thesis on the influence of the writings of Lenin he had read the Bible for the first time. Although he opened it seeking to discover for himself just how superior Lenin's writings were to this Christian propaganda nonsense, instead he encountered Jesus Christ and became a Christian. God was at work in that man's life decades ago, but it was for such a time as this, for it is now, in the providence of God, that he is taking God's Word to today's Ukrainian soldiers.

Don't let's wait till the battle is upon us before we hurriedly decide to watch and pray that we will not fall into temptation. Let us pray *now* that we will not be led where we are not equipped to go. In the psalm David speaks about being worn out from groaning, about flooding his bed with weeping and his couch with tears (v.6) but as we sometimes sing: 'mornings of joy give for evenings of tearfulness' and David wins through in the knowledge that the Lord has heard his weeping and his cry for mercy and he is delivered from evil as we will think about further, God-willing, next Sunday.

For now though, in the cool light of day, with our ears open to what God would say to us, *now* is when we need to be praying: "Lead us not into temptation."

Prayer

Lord, how often have we found ourselves in the heat of battle unprepared and vulnerable, left with nothing else to pray but 'How long, Lord, how long?' But it is here and now, Lord, that you call us to take up the sword of the Spirit, your living Word, and to prepare ourselves for a struggle that may be a long time coming yet. Equip us now with the armour we need, teach us to pray, Lord, and lead us not into temptation, for we ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.