Four Ways to be Lost and Found
Psalm 107

Over the Summer we are looking at some Psalms, and today we're going to look at Psalm 107. But before we do, let me ask you a question: what characteristics are you known for? And I don't mean physical characteristics, like 'he's bald and covered from head to foot in freckles', I mean your character traits. What would your wife or husband or someone who knows you well say about you? 'You know what, he is an incredibly faithful friend', or 'she has such a great sense of humour', or 'he has a hard edge to him, and you seriously don't want to get on the wrong side of him.' Those kind of characteristics. What marks you out?

Well, the reason I ask you that is because Psalm 107 majors on one such character trait of God, and then how that character trait in God should result in another character trait in us. And the characteristic of God that it homes in on is his steadfast, never ending love, which it mentions no less than 6 times. It's the main theme of the psalm. But if you know your Bible, you'll know that God's steadfast, his *hesed* love in Hebrew, isn't just a theme in this Psalm, it's one of the recurring themes throughout the Bible – that God has committed himself to love his people know matter what.

But what we're also going to see is that as we begin to grasp and enjoy that steadfast love towards us, it should lead to a character trait developing in us, and that is thankfulness. Steadfast love in God, resulting in thankfulness in us.

Now think about that. Because there's something about thankfulness that's attractive isn't there? And the opposite of thankfulness, none of us like. None of us like cynicism, or ingratitude, or when it seems someone is taking something for granted, do we? But when you see genuine, warm-hearted gratitude we like it. And we think, 'I want to be more like that.'

But one of the shockers of this Psalm is that it encourages us to see God's steadfast love and to respond with thankfulness in places you'd never imagine; when the circumstances you are in scream to you to do otherwise.

So let's look at the Psalm.

Reading: Psalm 107

So, it opens with this command: v1, 'Oh give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever.' So, one way we can grow in thankfulness, this character trait that we all like, is when we realise that God is good and that his love towards us never wavers. And that's going to result in a thankfulness that isn't just felt in the heart but gets spoken out. Verse 2: 'Let the redeemed of the Lord say so, whom he has redeemed from trouble.'

Now if you don't know, to redeem something means to buy it back, or to rescue it from something, typically by paying a price for it. So in ancient Israelite society, if you fell on hard times, what you wanted was for someone within your extended family to rise up as a kinsman redeemer, and they'd rescue you from debt, and take it on themselves, or buy you out of slavery, or lift you out of poverty, and they would be your redeemer and you'd be the redeemed.

And so the psalmist is saying, 'come on, let thankfulness build in your hearts, because out of his goodness and his steadfast love God has redeemed you from trouble.'

But what kind of trouble? And what kind of trouble could an ancient Israelite have experienced that could possibly have any similarity to what you might experience today?

Four Ways to Get Lost

Now, my girls hate this kind of point because they think it's a sneaky way of getting 4 sermon points in for the price of one. But as most of them are in Zimbabwe, I can do what I want!

Now, the commentators reckon that this psalm may have been written for a time of celebration when the people of God got together and remembered how God had redeemed them from exile and brought them back to the Promised Land: v3, 'and gathered in from the lands, from the east and from the west, from the north and from the south.' But having said that God had rescued his people from the four points of the compass, the writer goes on to describe four different types of people whom God has rescued. And I reckon that most, if not all of us, can find ourselves amongst them.

And the first one is **The Wanderer**. Verse 4-5, 'Some wandered in desert wastes, finding no way to a city to dwell in; hungry and thirsty, their soul fainted within them.' And the people of Israel knew what it was to wander in the desert. And those who had been taken into exile knew all about the hunger and thirst and exhaustion of a desert existence.

But there's something more here than a physical desert experience. Because if the steadfast love of God is one recurring theme in the Bible, so is this longing for a spiritual home, for Zion, for Jerusalem, a place where we can belong, where our soul can find rest; and that's a longing that was never going to be fulfilled purely by a physical city. It can only ever be satisfied, the Bible tells us, by finding our home and our rest in God. It's why Moses prays in Psalm 90, 'Lord, *you* have been our dwelling place in all generations.'

And the problem comes when we try and answer that longing for belonging or for meaning with other stuff that can never satisfy it – because then, like those lost in the desert, we just end up feeling more lost and more hungry and more thirsty and more spiritually and emotionally exhausted; because what we thought would satisfy us, whether that's a relationship, or a career, or sex or alcohol leaves us worse off than before. You ride the wave of this thing, and it feels like 'this is it! I've found it!' but then the crash comes, and if you'll excuse the mixed metaphors, it leaves you washed up, and all around is desert, with no way out, and everywhere you turn is sand, and what promised so much has turned to sand, and you feel lost in life.

Well, if you know what that feels like, you're the wanderer.

But if it's possible to get lost in the wide-open space of life, the second person the psalmist describes gets lost in the things that narrow life. And that's **the Shadow Dweller**.

Verses 10-11: 'Some sat in darkness and in the shadow of death, prisoners in affliction and in irons, for they had rebelled against the words of God, and spurned the counsel of the Most High.' Now, if the ancient Israelites knew what it was to wander in the desert,

when they were sent into exile to Babylon they also knew what it was to languish in jail. And that chain of events came about because they thought they could throw off God's requirements on them as a nation. Instead of worshipping him, they turned to idols; instead of protecting and caring for the needy, they oppressed them. They thought that throwing off God's law would make them free, to do whatever they wanted, and instead they found themselves incarcerated in a Babylonian jail.

But again, you don't have to dwell in ancient Israel to experience this kind of thing, do you? You see, at times God's word and his standards can seem incredibly narrow can't they? And as a society, at least in the West, individual freedom and autonomy have become modern day idols. We want to do whatever we want to, and we don't want to be told what we can and can't do, to be told otherwise is narrow and bigoted and constricting. But the irony is that when we pursue this rampant individualism, we end up in the darkness of our own prison. Sure not a prison like these guys knew, but we end up chained by selfishness, or self-centredness, we experience one relationship breakdown after another because we want *our* way.

Just listen to how the psalmist describes these original prisoners in v12: 'they fell down, *with none to help*.' They're in prison, but they're also alone. And the problem with this throwing off the rules, and me being the boss, and me calling the shots, is that we end up isolating ourselves. Our friends may come to us and try and help us and bring God's counsel into the situation, but we don't want to hear it, and so individualism, and me thinking I know best, can end up with this crushing sense of loneliness.

And so, what we thought would give us freedom – rebelling against the words of God, spurning the counsel of the Most High, to quote the psalmist, ends up giving us nothing of the sort. We seek freedom, but end up enslaved, and we dwell in the shadows of how life could really be lived.

So, you've got the wanderer and the shadow-dweller. But then the Psalmist gives us the third type of person, **The Fool**. Verses 17-18, 'Some were fools through their sinful ways, and because of their iniquities suffered affliction; they loathed any kind of food, and they drew near to the gates of death.'

Now, I don't think I've ever met anyone who liked being called a fool, and it's not exactly politically correct, is it! It's like calling someone the village idiot! But the Bible is much more nuanced when it talks of someone being a fool. Because to be a fool is to be the opposite of wise. And biblical wisdom is all about living life skilfully, making good choices, with God at the centre of life, so life thrives. And so if you read the book of Proverbs, which is all about this wisdom and talks a lot about the fool, you soon learn that you can be extremely intelligent, you can be surrounded by friends and by opportunity, you can seem to have made it in life, but still be a fool, because you've failed to grasp what life is really all about.

But the guys the psalmist is describing here are anything but successful. In fact they are facing affliction and sickness precisely because they have not been wise in the choices they've made. In a sense, they are reaping in their physical health the harvest of what they have sown with their lives. And it would be easy, wouldn't it, to draw a line from that to the issues we face today of drug or alcohol misuse, or sexual health, or gluttony and point the finger at others. But this issue of health and self-inflicted disease – *dis-*

ease – is much more subtle than that isn't it? I mean, think about the health of your marriage or your family, and how some of the unwise choices we make in life can affect those. And even our physical health can suffer from poor work-life choices. So, whilst we may not look like a fool to anyone else, we may not be quite so skilful at living as we think. And we're all in danger of suffering for our own folly.

So, there's The Wanderer and The Shadow Dweller and The Fool, but the fourth person who needs rescuing, the psalmist says, is **The Overwhelmed**.

Verses 23: 'Some went down to the sea in ships, doing business on the great waters'; verses 25-27: 'He [that's God] commanded and raised the stormy wind, which lifted up the waves of the sea. They mounted up to heaven; they went down to the depths; their courage melted away in their evil plight; they reeled and staggered like drunken men and were at their wits' end.'

And so the psalmist is describing traders, businessmen, plying their trade across the Mediterranean Sea, who get caught in one of these horrendous storms, with these waves that towered over the boat, and one moment the boat was lifted up, and the next it was plunging down. And in the midst of it all, these men can't find their feet, they're overwhelmed and at their wits end.

And you don't have to be an ancient trader to experience life like that, do you? To feel like you have been hit by a storm, to feel totally overwhelmed, to feel lost in the circumstances you face, and it seems like there is wave after wave and you are plunging down, and you can't take it anymore. And for the ancient Israelites, they saw the sea as an almost physical embodiment of chaos, and there are times when you and I can feel overwhelmed by the chaos of life, and you desperately search for order in it all, for somewhere to plant your feet, and there seems no where, no respite from the storm.

But before we leave the overwhelmed, just think about who these guys were. They were businessmen, like some of you, they were used to being the ones in control and then they're hit by something totally out of their control, and they are at the mercy of events and disaster looms. And they too need rescuing.

So four ways to get lost in the middle of life: the wanderer, the shadow-dweller, the fool and the overwhelmed. But the wonderful thing about this psalm is that it tells us that God doesn't leave us lost.

God of the Rescue

A few weeks back we watched the Disney film 'Frozen' with the girls. I don't know if you've seen it, and I don't want to spoil it for you, but let's just say it's not the deepest film I've ever watched. And any film with a singing snowman in it is never really going to make it as a guy film. But what was remarkable about it, at least from my perspective, was that one of the main characters could only be saved by an act of sacrificial love. And one of the final scenes is really a death and resurrection scene.

And that impressed me because just a week or two before I had watched an interview with a writer who had said that every good story is a death and resurrection story. They follow an inverted J-shaped curve. Things are ok, but then things get worse, and disaster or darkness comes, but out of that darkness comes something better than ever.

And this author was saying that all great stories follow that pattern – and if you read Dickens, or Jane Austen or Tolkien or Lewis, or even if you just watch Disney movies, you'll know there's some truth there.

And each of these four scenarios follow that same pattern. The wanderer ends up in a desert, hungry, thirsty, exhausted, with no way of escape. The Shadow Dweller is in prison, in irons, bowed down. The fool suffers affliction and draws near the gates of death. The Overwhelmed see their courage melt away and are at their wits' end. But then there comes a tipping point. And things get so bad that they each do the same thing: v6, 13, 19, 28: 'Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble.'

And when we reach that tipping point, and we've come to the end of ourselves, and we cry out to God, then He reaches out his hand in rescue. And each 'they cried to the Lord in their trouble' is followed by 'and he delivered them from their distress.' Verse 7, and 'He led them by a straight way till they reached a city to dwell in.' And so the Wanderer can finally find a place of rest where he knows he belongs. Verse 14, and 'He brought them out of darkness and the shadow of death, and burst their bonds apart.' And the shadow dweller can find real life and real freedom, not by rejecting God, but by enjoying his love. Verse 20, 'He sent out his word and healed them, and delivered them from their destruction.' And the Fool can find healing for himself and his loved ones as he hears the word of God speaking into his life. Verse 29, 'He made the storm be still, and the waves of the sea were hushed… and he brought them to their desired haven.' And the Overwhelmed can find respite and safety from the storm.

And it's all, the Psalmist says, because of God's steadfast, never-ending love for us. He is the God of the Rescue.

But did you notice something unsettling in those four scenarios? You see for two out of the four, something had to happen first before they would cry out to him. It's as if God had to let things get even worse, he had to turn up the heat even more, before they reached their own tipping point. Of the Shadow Dweller, the prisoner, verse 12 says, 'God bowed their hearts down with hard labour'. God has to increase the burden they're carrying before they will turn to him. And in verse 25, for the Overwhelmed, the Psalmist says, 'He [God] commanded and raised the stormy wind.' And so all the time it's God who was behind the storm, and it needed a storm, to finally brings them to their senses.

And there are times when God will let our circumstances roll on way longer than we are comfortable with. Worse, this psalm tells us that God may even make our circumstances worse, he may increase our burden, he may send a storm, he may bring us to the place of feeling totally alone, to bring us to the place he wants us. And the last part of the psalm, in v33-42, talks of God turning rivers into deserts, and fruitful land into salty wastes as well as deserts into pools of water. So God is the God who doesn't just make deserts into gardens but gardens into deserts. Yes, he makes things better, but sometimes he makes them worse first. Sometimes he will bring down before he lifts up. But however he is orchestrating things, whether good things are happening or bad, God is always good, the Psalmist says, and always loving. And he is doing it to redeem us, to buy us back from every false hope and every false dream that will never satisfy, that we might find real life and joy and meaning in him.

And we can know that because he is not just the God of the rescue but God of the greatest reversal ever.

God of the Reversal

You see, whether you're the wanderer lost in the desert, the shadow dweller lost in your prison, the fool lost in your less than wise choices, or the overwhelmed lost in the midst of the storm, Christ has plumbed those depths for you. He is the King of glory who humbled himself, who brought himself down, into our messed up world. And he entered the wilderness of a desert to be tempted. And he came and entered our prison, the prison of the shadow dweller, and allowed himself to be arrested and abused and falsely charged; and if the shadow dweller knows what it is to be alone, then the Son of God knows what it is to be betrayed and abandoned by his friends and ultimately be abandoned by God. And if the fool approaches the gates of death because of his own foolish choices, at the cross the immortal Son of God chose to open those and pass through them into death. And if the Overwhelmed face a storm of circumstances, Jesus threw himself into the storm of God's wrath against our sin.

And he did it all because if his steadfast, never ending, never failing, never faltering love for you. To rescue you. Because he is good and all that he does is good. And having humbled himself to death, God brought about *the* great reversal and raised Jesus from the dead. It is the ultimate death-resurrection story. And that is why Jesus is *the* great redeemer, the great rescuer. Because he's paid the price to bring us back from our lostness.

He finds and brings us wanderers back, because he's the Way, the way out of the desert. He's the living water that can quench our thirst, the bread from heaven that can satisfy our hunger, the one who gives the weary rest.

He's the one who delivers us shadow dwellers from the prisons we put ourselves in when we think we know better than God, the one who proclaims liberty, real freedom, to us captives. He's the one whose words are spirit and life and can bring healing into those situations we have created by our foolish choices. And he's the one who can still the storm of the overwhelmed, and give real, lasting peace of heart to all who will trust him.

And so this morning, if you're not yet a Christian, but you recognise yourself in this psalm, today would be a great day to call out to God to rescue you through Christ. And if you are a Christian but you also see yourself here, call out to him again and tell him you want to come home.

And the psalmist ends the psalm by saying, v43, 'whoever is wise, let him attend to these things; let them consider the steadfast love of the Lord.' And as we do that, as we call out to him for rescue, or as we look back on his love for us in Christ and how he has already rescued us, then thanksgiving and joy and praise will well up in our hearts, as we say with the psalmist, 'Let them – let us – thank the Lord for his steadfast love, for his wondrous works to the children of man!' (v8, 15, 21, 31).