An Unshakeable Refuge in Life and Death
Psalm 16

Over the summer we're looking at some of the Psalms which, when the writers of the New Testament read them they said, 'O wow, this is talking about Jesus!'

And if that was true of any psalm, it was true about Psalm 16 which we're looking at today. Because in his very first sermon, when Peter stood up on Pentecost and preached about Jesus' resurrection from the dead, what text did he turn to? Psalm 16. And when Paul preached in Antioch, trying to persuade Jewish worshippers about Jesus, where did he turn? Psalm 16.

And the question is, why? To which you might say, 'Well, that's obvious, Martin, Just look at v10 - the verse Peter and Paul both quote: 'You will not abandon my soul to Sheol, or let your holy one see corruption' and slam dunk that's talking about Jesus' resurrection 2000 years before it actually happened.'

And you'd be right. Except, it goes deeper than that, doesn't it? Because read this psalm and you realise it's addressing one of *the* deep questions of life: which is, 'where can you find happiness and confidence and a sense of security in life when all along death is like a shadow hanging over you? Because in his bestselling book, *A Brief History of Thought*, Luc Ferry the French philosopher says that's basically *the* question all philosophy has always been trying to answer: How can you find true happiness and security when death is always lurking?

But of course Peter and Paul and the other apostles pick up this psalm and go - well, let us tell you.

So, we're going to look at four things. The certainty of uncertainty, the refuges we run to, the harvest we reap, and the path to life

The Certainty of Uncertainty
Look at v1: 'Preserve me, O God, for in you I take refuge.' So David begins this psalm with a prayer for protection. And yet, as numerous commentators point out, it's not clear why. Because if you look at the other psalms, there's often either a title or something in the psalm itself that tells us, oh this is what David was facing, and that explains why he prays the way he does.

But here, there doesn't seem to be anything specific. So why is he praying to God to preserve him? Well… think of David's life. He was always facing one threat or another. Whether it was serving King Saul, or living in exile as an outlaw, or living in a palace as a king, David was always having to live with one uncertainty or another.

But now think about your own life - and isn't the same true for you? It could be your job situation or relationship difficulties. It could be your health or that of those you love. And it can feel at times like nothing in life is certain, that the ground is always shifting, and you get over one thing, but then there's another heading your way, the next thing you have to deal with or fight through. And how does that leave you feeling?

I recently read an interview with Owen Farrell, the former captain of the England Rugby team. And the article detailed all the struggles Farrell had faced - from injury to red cards, or criticism from spectators or commentators. And in the face of it all Farrell said, 'I just want to be happy.'

But don't we all? The problem is, life seems to conspire against us, while as David says in v10 - and as Luc Ferry argues the philosophers would agree - death, that ultimate thief of happiness, overshadows us.

Now, I don't know if you've seen the Alertswiss app. But it pings you a warning if there are any natural hazards or risks in your area. But go to its webpage and it's headlined with the question, 'Are You Safe?' Good question but not just for hiking. Because *where can you find* security and confidence and happiness amidst the uncertainty of life and the ultimate certainty of death?

The Refuges We Run To

Look again at David's opening: Verses 1-2: 'Preserve me, O God, for in you I take refuge. I say to the LORD, you are my Lord; I have no good apart from you.' So David in two verses uses all three of the Hebrew titles commonly used for God: there's God - El: the God above all gods; there's the LORD - YHWH: I Am Who I Am; and there's Lord - Adonai: my lord and king.

It's as if David is taking every facet of God's character, every facet of who he is, and saying 'that's where, that's *who* my security is.' So even as he asks God to preserve him, what becomes clear is that this has already been David's habit - 'for in you I take refuge and it's in you that all my good is found.'

But what about you? Because if that's where David turns, where do you and I turn? Well, that's what's interesting about this psalm, because it gives us some diagnostic questions to help us answer *that* question.

I mean, firstly, just ask yourself, **where do you run** when life is uncertain? Because in v4 he talks of those *who run after other gods*. Well, when you're stressed because things are uncertain or life is not going the way you want, where's your safe space, the place you run to?

You see, v1 tells us that David doesn't simply run to God when he needs him, but lives with the constant awareness of God as his refuge. But what's that default for you - when you're under pressure, or relationships are cracking or creaking? Where's your safe space, your functional refuge?

It could be entertainment and a bit of mindless amusement going down YouTube rabbit holes because that helps you momentarily forget your problems. It could be throwing yourself into work - and work is your refuge from your kids, or your marriage, or your singleness. It could be alcohol, or food. And you're stressed, and that glass of wine…? It just lessens it. That's your safe space.

But David is saying, "I have no good apart from you." And all these other things may be good, but they can't hold me steady, they can't keep me, they can't do me good, like you can.

But secondly, **Who - or what - do you delight in?** Verse 3, 'As for the saints in the land, they are the excellent ones, in whom is all my delight.' In other words, whether it was as an outlaw *cut off* from God's people, or as king *ruling over* God's people, David wanted to be with God's people. They were the ones he wanted to hang out with.

Well, who is that for you? Because when life is good, or not so good, who you turn to and want to be with says a lot about where your heart finds its delight.

Take the apostles, Peter and John. They were arrested for preaching about Jesus, and before being released they were ordered not to speak again about Jesus. So they've got this threat hanging over them. So whether they realise it or not, this is going to be a test of where they're looking for their security and happiness and delight. So, when they're released, do they go, 'err, things are getting a bit hot round here, let's just lie low for a bit and let everything cool down - let's go play some golf.' No. Acts 4:23 says, 'When they were released, *they went to their friends*.' In other words, they went to church. When threatened, they just naturally turned to God's people and their Christian friends. It was their default.

And the people you delight in, the people you want to be with, the people you want to be like, tells you - that's where I think happiness is found. That's what I think life is really about.

Thirdly, **who or what do you worship?** Verse 4, 'The sorrows of those who run after another god shall multiply; their drink offerings of blood I will not pour out or take their names on my lips.' Now, of course, in David's day, there was a whole pantheon of gods that pagans worshipped: gods of good harvests and great fertility; gods of sporting prowess, and military power; gods of music and culture; food and feasting and safe travel.

And yet, you didn't have to be a pagan to worship them, you just had to want what they offered. And the recurring problem of the people of Israel was their tendency to syncretism. Did they worship YHWH - the God of Israel? Sure… but… they also worshipped these other gods, gods who when there was something they really wanted promised to give it.

Now today, pretty much no-one believes in those gods, do they? I mean, if a farmer wants a good harvest or you want a loaf of bread neither of you sacrifices to goddess Demeter, the god of agriculture and food do you? He'll go to a seed merchant and you'll go to Migros. And yet - the things these gods offered? - like good food and wine, or success and money, or romance, sex and family, or influence and power, or sport and culture, music or travel - aren't they the very same things we look to and think 'if I could have that I'd be happy; I'd know I'm doing ok.' And we may not pour out blood offerings - but don't we still make sacrifices of other things - even our families - to get what the gods offer, because we want them and need them?

The problem is, as the first commandment points out, you can't have any God but God and as Jesus said, you cannot serve two masters. In other words, what we're looking to for life and happiness tells us - that's what we're worshipping, that's our god - at least, that's what's functioning as our god.

Fourthly, **what's your ambition?** Verses 5-6: 'The Lord is my chosen portion and my cup; you hold my lot. The lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; indeed, I have a beautiful inheritance.' And every term David uses there - portion and lot and lines in pleasant places, was used for the plot of land ascribed to each tribe in the Promised Land. This was their share in the future, their share in the land of blessing. This was what told them they'd arrived.

What would that be for you? What, if you had it, if you achieved it, would enable you to go,'Made it. This was what all that work and struggle and wandering in the desert was for'? What would 'portion and cup', land and legacy, your share of the promised land, look like for you?

But of course, this was personal for David. Because when Saul and his men were hunting him down and David was given the chance to take Saul's life - he refused. And in the aftermath, in stating his case to Saul, he said of Saul's allies, "They have driven me out this day *that I should have no share in the heritage of the Lord, saying, 'Go serve other gods'*" (1 Sam 26:19). In other words, his enemies are trying to disinherit him from the land and the Lord. They're trying to rob him of his portion and cup.

But what does David discover? 'The Lord is my land. The Lord is my portion and cup. You're my food and drink, you're my Promised Land and my lasting legacy. And whether in good or bad, plenty or want, the lines have fallen for me in pleasant places, because you are that place.' As Augustine said, "He who has God has everything, even if he has nothing else."

So just consider your ambitions: what do they tell you about you? And if you fail to achieve them, will you still know the lines have fallen for you in pleasant places because you have God? Because whatever your ambitions are tell you, this is what I'm really looking to to know I'm ok, that I've made it in life, that I can hold my head up, that I'm secure.

But fifthly, **who counsels you in the night?** Verse 7, 'I bless the Lord who gives me counsel; in the night also my heart instructs me.' Now, do you ever lie awake at night trying to solve your life? Do you ever lie there, mind whirring, finding it difficult to bring order and make sense not just of the day but your life? If you're married, do you ever lie there feeling resentful towards the one lying beside you? Or if you're single, do you lie there wishing you did have someone beside you?

And when you're in the dark like that, who's your counsellor? As you lie there, whose word, whose counsel, is shaping you and forming the way you see the ups and downs, the struggles and uncertainties that are keeping you awake?

And David could say, it's the Lord. And verse 8, 'I have set the Lord always before me' - like a mountain guide leading him along the path. Like a shepherd leading his sheep, 'the Lord is before me, and where he goes, I'll go'

So who is that counsellor for you? Because our thoughts in the dark reveal something of where our true hope lies.

Now, all of that could just be a bit of theoretical psychology, it it wasn't for the impact it can all have on our lives.

The Harvest We Reap

Look again at what David says of those who look to idols to give them what they want in life: Verse 4, '*The sorrows* of those who run after another god *shall multiply*.' In other words, worship the wrong god, like the god of romance or sex, freedom or success, comfort, entertainment, travel, reputation or power, and ultimately they won't give you life, they'll drain it. They won't be a refuge but a robber - even as you sacrifice family or friends or faith to get them.

But why? Why as we get further enmeshed in them does David say our sorrows multiply? Firstly, because despite all our sacrifices we might never get what we want. Secondly, we might get it, only to discover, ultimately, it doesn't satisfy, and look what we've sacrificed, look what we've lost, in

the process. Or thirdly, maybe it does satisfy, but what's lurking round the corner? Old age and death - the final robbers - which just makes the loss and sorrow all the greater.

And yet, David says, all outcomes are *not* equal. Because if *multiplying sorrows* are the harvest you reap from idols, just look at the *multiple goods* David says he reaps from running to God for refuge.

Firstly, the beauty of knowing God himself - v6, 'I have a *beautiful* inheritance.' And God is David's inheritance, and so if there is such a thing as beauty, and there is, there must be something that's *the most* beautiful, and it's God, David says. Which means, you can know that beauty.

Then, there's the wisdom that comes with having God as your counsellor: v7: 'I bless the Lord *who gives me counsel*; in the night also *my heart instructs me*.' And that, David says, can give your heart stability, even in the midst of instability and uncertainty: v8, 'Because he is at my right hand, I shall not be shaken.' Which means, even when everything else is insecure, you can be deeply secure. And not just secure but experience joy in the midst of it. As David says, v9, '*Therefore* my heart is glad, and my whole being rejoices; my flesh also dwells secure.'

And thirdly, that refuge, that safe space, extends even to the point of death, David says: v10 again, 'For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol, or let your holy one see corruption.' I mean, others might abandon me, and idols might abandon their worshippers, but with you, David says, I am safe and well.

Now, you might respond to that, 'Sure, but David still died. And maybe this worked for a bit, like idols might work for a bit, but ultimately death makes a mockery of anything we look to for security - even religion. So isn't the idea of a refuge from the uncertainty of life and the certainty of death an illusion?'

The Path to Life

Look again at v10: 'For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol, or let your holy one see corruption.' And, on the surface, David is clearly talking about himself - that God will rescue him even from death.

And at various points in his life, God did just that, and delivered David from the verge of death. And yet, he still died. And no Jewish person had any concept of someone, *literally, personally, in history,* being raised from the dead and rescued *from out of* Sheol, the place of the dead. At the end of time, at the final resurrection, with all God's people - maybe. But *in time*, to an individual, like David - no one thought like that.

And as for David being holy, *the* Holy One in fact, *did he* look to God as his refuge? Sure he did. But weren't there also times when he looked to sex, or power, or comfort, for his safe space? And if we're honest, as we consider those 5 diagnostic questions, we don't score much better than David, do we?

So if David died, what's he talking about here? And who is this holy one whose body won't see decay?

Well, that's what the apostles realised. And speaking at Pentecost, Peter quotes that verse and says, "Brothers, I may say to you with confidence about the patriarch David that he both died and was

buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. Being therefore a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him that he would set one of his descendants on his throne, he foresaw and spoke about the resurrection of the Christ, that he was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh see corruption. This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses." (Acts 2:29-31)

And Paul quotes it at Antioch and says, "For David, after he had served the purpose of God in his own generation, fell asleep and was laid with his fathers and saw corruption, but he whom God raised up did not see corruption." (Acts 13:36-37).

So before he died, on multiple occasions David *was* delivered from the verge of death, but *after* he died Jesus was delivered from the very grip of death. David was repeatedly delivered from the edge of Sheol, but once and for all Jesus was delivered *from out of* Sheol. And for David, death was an end, but for Jesus his resurrection was just the beginning - the beginning of the New Creation, the first fruits of the resurrection of all God's people - including David.

Because as the apostles realised, Jesus was and is the ultimate Holy One, the only One who unfailingly looked to God for refuge. The only one who passes every diagnostic question. And because he did, you can find refuge in him.

You see, David delighted in God's people and so he served them until he died, but Jesus delighted in his people so much he died for us - even when there was nothing delightful about us. Even when we were looking everywhere else for happiness and security. And all the idols we might look to for life require us to sacrifice ourselves, or those we love, to get what they offer. But at the cross Christ sacrificed himself for our sins, his life for ours, that we might have all that he offers. Look to them for life, David says, and they just increase our sorrows, but Christ became the Man of Sorrows to take away all our sorrow. Even the ultimate sorrow of death

And David knew God as his counsellor in the night, but Isaiah tells us Jesus is that counsellor - the Wonderful Counsellor. The Light to guide us through the night. And when you know he's the Holy One, who has passed the test for you, and that he's been raised from the dead, he'll increasingly become your counsellor, and you'll find yourself able to face the uncertainties of life and the certainty of death with stability and joy, because you know he's already defeated your greatest enemy. As Charles Spurgeon, the great victorian preacher, wrote of this psalm 'Die we must but rise we shall.'

You see, look how David closes this psalm: v11: 'You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.' In other words, everything else we might look to for life - for happiness in the good days or just to get us through the bad days, is just a faint echo of the real joy to be found in the fountain of all joy. And to be satisfied with them is like licking drops from the rock, when just over there is the waterfall of God.

And David says, 'you have made known to me the path of life', and Jesus said, I am that path. I am the way, the truth and the life. The path to all the joy and pleasure, security and stability that you're longing for. Because look where David says those pleasures are found: in God's presence and at his right hand. And who sits at God's right hand? Christ does. Look to anything else as your ultimate, and your sorrows will multiply, David says. But look to Christ, sitting at God's right hand, and pleasure is yours forevermore - however uncertain now might be.