

Rock steady

Psalm 62

Can you describe a time when you experienced a really great rest?

When things start getting out of control, I feel like everything's swirling around. Like everything's a bit loose and open and vulnerable and I can't get a grip on anything. It's like there's stuff all around me and I don't know which way to turn, where to begin, which way to focus or how to settle down and get grounded and centred.

Maybe you know the feeling. Maybe you've got no idea what I'm talking about. Others put life's struggles in other ways - finding it hard to keep your head above water. Juggling too many balls. Spinning lots of plates. Bottling lots of things up. Whether it's the commitments and stresses of everyday life, or it's dealing with a profound experience of loss, pain or new frailty in life; most of us know that feeling of being out of control and struggling with that.

There's lots of ways of responding to these feelings of struggle that occur to me. I could start by reaching for a stiff drink. I could start by giving myself a treat to take my mind off things - something new to wear or drive or play with. I could get away from it all - find some rest in getting away as often as possible from the circumstances that cause my head to spin. I could withdraw from people as much as possible, and hope that decreases the noise and makes everything more manageable.

I've been tempted to think the answer lies in every one of those responses to the stresses and strains of life. But my experience has been that sitting still with God in prayer is the *one* thing that truly brings me *rest*. Rest from all that head strife. Rest from all the feelings of flapping or falling or drowning or struggling under the weight of things.

Coming to God to sit still and pray is pretty much always something that makes me think 'Ach, yeah, maybe this'll be good.' But it's also something that, every time I actually sit still and do it, I find brings rest for the soul.

I'm centred, grounded; I have things in new perspective. When I pray, I become steady. Secure. Safe. It's not that all the too-many-things-to-do goes away, or the deep hurt of a traumatic experience disappears. But none of those things overwhelm or defeat me when I'm sitting still with my God. There's a shift in my heart; I find the fear subsiding and a new peace arise.

When you read Psalm 62, you read about King David experiencing the same sort of thing. David was a man who went through the incredible daily pressures of a life in highest office - running a country, leading a people establishing a nation. He directly experienced some incredibly traumatic things - several battlefields, the death of his best friend, the abduction of his wife, the death of his baby, becoming a refugee repeatedly, assassination attempts, the death of his adult son, a plague on the nation he led.

And what David turns to is not drink, as many holidays as possible, withdrawal or material wealth; despite all of these being more available to him than most. What David turns to is being in the presence of God. He describes beautifully what that's like in Psalm 62, vv.1-2 and 5-8. He says that God is like a rock to stand upon; a fortress to stand within; and a refuge to stand under.

You've got this repeated refrain in vv.2 and 6 - 'He alone is my rock and my salvation; He is my fortress, I shall never be shaken.' And then in v.7, 'He is my mighty rock, my refuge.' This image of God as David's rock is there three times. This is how David pictures God - the One he can firmly stand upon when everything else around seems to be swirling and unsteady.

When you find in God a Rock, you find the steadiest and sturdiest thing possible for your soul to stand upon. Lots of us have been through experiences this year that have knocked us down, thrown us around and shaken us out. The best thing you can do if you're trying to find some solid ground to centre on is to plant your feet on solid rock.

That's got nothing to do with you picking yourself up and dusting yourself off, puffing your chest out at the world ready for another round. How many of us, when we go through ordinary stresses or extraordinary losses, try to pick up the pieces and centre ourselves again in some new way, and find it impossibly difficult?

David knows that the soul really only knows rest and peace and hope and salvation when it's centred on God the rock. And I find you only remember when you're sitting down in prayer to experience that again.

One of the big differences here, of course, is that *God* becomes the centre again when He's your rock, rather than *you* being the centre of a world you're trying to hold together. It's one of the illusions the world lives by that things are best for me when I put myself in the centre. After all, I'm wobbly and

changeable. God, however, is strong, firm, constant, always there, always ready to be leaned upon. A much better centre for my life and being.

What effect does it have on you when God becomes the centre of your world? How is it different from when you're at the centre?

David has another firm, strong picture for God - He's not just a Rock to stand upon, but a Fortress to stand within. A fortress offers shelter and defence from everything that you feel overwhelmed and assaulted by. David's experience is that coming into the presence of God offers him such an effective fortress, that he can never be shaken by the things that would threaten to overcome him.

There are a lot of things that feel like they're too big for us and they're going to defeat us. Financial pressures. Health issues, both physical and mental. Relationships breaking. Work pressures constantly increasing. Exam results. Responsibilities we have committed to, or we are considering committing to. And the extraordinary blows that we get hit with in bereavement and other sudden losses.

Some of us might experience what David describes in vv.3-4 - the enemies that were out to get him, who seemed to be driven by causing him to wobble and fall.

But the experience of God's people as they come to be with Him in prayer is that we have come to a place of security and safety where none of these things can get near toppling us. Sitting with God, standing in that fortress, reminds us that the core of who we are is not and cannot be defeated by any of that stuff.

David says in v.7, 'My salvation and my honour depend on God.' The things that David understood as core to his identity - salvation and honour - were things he understood as being gifted to him by God. Since God had given David his very identity, no human could ever take that from him.

You are a child of God, adopted by Him through your faith in Jesus Christ, to live with Him both now and forever. Whatever assails you, whether from within or without, there is nothing that can come close to shaking you from that core identity. You'll discover that anew as you sit still in prayer to the God who is your fortress.

God is, by the way, a far better fortress than the other walls we try to put around us to protect ourselves. Your fortress is what you hide in. In vv.9-10, David reflects more on the fleetingness of the ones we make for ourselves. v. 9 says we're all just a breath. Whether living ordinary lives, or moving in high places - the position and status thing is all an illusion and lie, and in the end we're all here today, gone tomorrow.

v.10 says that riches are not the place to set your heart, even if they're growing - not least because the biggest fortresses are often by ill gotten gain.

For some people, their fortress is their house. I describe our parish as a place where people go out to work and come home to their fortresses to hide away. But even when people live the dream and get their house, it's fragile. It costs money to run (and big mortgages are crippling lots of people here). It leaks and breaks and needs fixing.

Some people share their houses with family or others, and experience all the stresses and tensions of that. Others live alone, and experience the loneliness of that. Homes are reasonably effective at keeping the world out unless we want to let them in. But they're not as good a fortress for your soul as being in the presence of God.

Others find their fortress in their families. 'There's nothing more important than family' everyone says. The trouble is, sometimes people who love us let us down, because we're all imperfect sinners. Sometimes they move. Sometimes they leave. Sometimes they die. Family at its best offers so much of support and protection and help and surrounding, but it's not as good a fortress for your soul as being in the presence of God.

Some people find their fortress in money. Getting as much of it as you can, to make life more comfortable, to insulate you from unforeseen events and costs, to surround yourself with possessions that you expect will make you feel content.

But so often, the money we have soon goes surprisingly quickly. It quickly happens that you don't own money or possessions so much as they own you - directing your life, enslaved to counting the pennies or keeping your stuff good and shiny and undamaged. They say money doesn't bring you happiness, but it buys a better standard of misery. What a tragically low aspiration for life; when it's possible to find a much better fortress for your soul in the presence of God.

What do you tend to hide in? How well does that work?

So God is the Rock to stand upon, and the Fortress to stand within. David also describes God as his Refuge to stand under. In vv.7-8, David's got this image of refuge at the front of his mind. 'He is my mighty rock, my *refuge*. Trust in Him at all times, O people, pour out your hearts to Him, for God is our *refuge*.'

David thinks of being with God as a safe space. A place to pour your heart out to God, to express everything in that's there. All that seems serious and all that seems silly, everything hopeful and everything dark. Hopes and fears, dreams and nightmares. When you close in to be with God, you are in a safe space.

A place of refuge gives something special to people - a place to feel safe from the threat that hangs over them, and a place to be free and open about expressing everything going on inside. Some have experienced this in women's refuge centres. Others in the refuge of a good foster home or with good adopting parents. Scores of Syrians and Central Africans have experienced it, however imperfectly, as refugees from conflict.

Maybe only those who have been through something like this can understand just how precious a thing a place of refuge is. David certainly understood it. He was a refugee more than once. His life was constantly under threat, from his youth under King Saul to his years as king even from his own family.

Maybe you've got to go through incredible disturbances and upheaval in life before you'll really value the refuge that you find in being in God's presence. Look again at vv.7-8 - David isn't just saying that he finds God to be a refuge, he's longing for others to realise that and experience it and pour their hearts out to God.

I'm longing for the comfortable complacent suburbanites of Inverness to discover this too. Are you? I'm longing for people to stop talking about thinking and talking about personal prayer and worshipping God together on a Sunday as if it's something they suppose they should do. I'm longing for people to *want* to pray, to *want* to worship together.

To stop acting like these are things they feel vaguely guilty about not doing more of, and start discovering that in prayer and in gathered worship there are the things that David found - rest, salvation and hope.

That's what he talks about finding in vv.1 and 8. Rest - a real *break* from worry and fear and strife. Salvation - the experience of being *made safe* in life, which Jesus has secured for His people even beyond death. And hope - to find in prayer that sense that in the end, you really are going to be alright. *More* than alright.

These are the things that David experiences in God the Rock, Fortress and Refuge for his soul. It's the most life-giving, life-saving, life-changing place to be.

We're just back from three weeks' holiday in Northern Ireland. Heather's homeland, not mine - and something inside me wants to be proud of where *I'm* from - Inverness. But especially when we spend so much time there, I can't help but observe a *big* difference between Christian people here and there in terms of our prayerfulness.

I talk to Christians here and you tell me that you're not praying so much now or not been at church lately because things have been tough; you'll get back to it when things settle down. Meanwhile I can still see the anxiety, restlessness and sometimes fear in your eyes.

But I talk to Christians in Northern Ireland that we know who have been through incredible tragedy or overwhelmingly burdened daily lives, and they exude a genuine peace, centredness, and unshakable security about life and death. And these are people who won't on any account stop worshipping God together, or coming to Him day by day to be in His presence. It makes all the difference in the world.

People who have been through a lot of the things that David has, and a lot of the things that some of us have - the death of their baby, the death of their adult child, persecution, incredible daily pressures in the office they hold - when you listen to them, you can hear in their words and see on their faces that the peace and security and shelter they know is genuine.

I think you know that you'll find some examples of that amongst people in our church. But I long that all of us would follow their example and discover the fullness of life that comes from this kind of life of unwavering worship and prayer.

This sermon's not simply to describe to you what David felt like when he prayed, and how I find it similar when I get serious about sitting down to pray. And it's not to scold already hurting people about not being more like the

Northern Irish Christians who pray lots and are really committed to church and worship.

But it is to express this longing, like David does in v.8, that we will *all* pour our hearts out to God, in the safe space that He alone can give as Rock, Fortress and Refuge. That we won't stop doing that when things are hard, but follow David's example and press in all the more. That we'll discover the peace and security and life there is in that.

The question is how you're going to respond to this. Do you agree with what David says? - 'My soul finds rest in God alone.' Do you think that's true? If you've been too distracted to experience that rest in prayer, what are you going to do about that? What time this week are you going to set aside to sit still with God? For more than a quick 5 minutes with some noise in the background?

I think some of us are scared. Scared that once we sit down to do that, it's going to be a big deal. Walls are going to come down, maybe tears are going to fall, and the floodgates are going to open, and you're not quite ready for that. If that's you today, I think God says to you 'Stop putting me off. Wouldn't it be better to sit down and pour your heart out to me, than to keep going like you are? Set aside time, and let's talk.' I imagine that if that is what He is saying to you, the Holy Spirit will be confirming that to you now.

I think some of us are distracted. Because we're actually hiding in some other fortress or leaning all our weight on something else, we're not praying or worshipping much. I think for some of us, we just need to identify what's pulling us away and make sure that sitting still with God is the one place where we find our soul's rest and renewal, so that these other things can still be in our lives but in their proper place.

And I think some of us are just plain busy. Busy with work, busy with kids, busy with the house, busy looking after older relatives - all the stuff that keeps all of us so occupied. We're about to head out of the summer and back into term time, when we fall into default patterns of busyness that make us throw our hands up and go, 'oh well, some day I'll pray.'

So why not, before today is done, look at your diary and decide the time in your daily or weekly patterns, that you are going to start sitting down quietly with God to be in that place of safety and shelter with Him?

David wraps up in v.11 saying that what He has heard God reveal to Him is that God is strong and God is loving. That's David's experience too, expressed in this prayer in Psalm 62. It's the two things that you need to know about your God. He is strong; stronger than anything, even death. And He is loving. So you can lean your whole life on Him. There's nothing to fear from that and everything to gain.

'Trust in Him at all times, O people; pour out your hearts to Him...' Your Rock. Your Fortress. Your Refuge. Your God.