

**A Wineskin in the Smoke.** Psalm 119 73-88 Lk4.1-13. 21<sup>st</sup> Feb 2010

Home Group

Have you got your tickets yet for March 6<sup>th</sup>? Who else can you think of to bring?

Worship: Sing something, because we're studying a Psalm, I'm not giving you a Psalm for this slot, you'll have to go and sing something!

Word

1. What have you given up / taken up for Lent? Why?
2. Read Psalm 119.73-88
3. What are the clues that suggest that this Psalmist is under stress, drying out?
4. How does he deal with his stress?
5. What does he wish upon his enemies? How realistic is that!
6. What does he look for from God? How do you go about getting that?
7. What does he look for from fellow believers?
8. Any other tips in this bit of the Psalm for how to deal with stress?
9. Any other tips that you can suggest about how to cope?
10. Why is this Psalm set for Lent, alongside Luke 4.1-11?

Works:

Pray for each other! And those who're going through the mill.

For next time: Meditate on Psalm 27 between now and next Home Group. Read it and read it again.

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When I read Psalm 119, it seems to me as if the Psalmist is a **bit full of himself**. He seems to be very spiritual and religious, as if he's saying - **Oh I love your laws** and all I want to do is pray all day and read my bible. And whilst that's all very commendable there's something slightly **sycophantic** about it, slightly unreal.

But as we have a closer look at this passage we find there there's a **deeper story** going on. I found it by looking at the one phrase that simply made no sense to me – I am like a **wineskin in the smoke** – but you can find it in the easier bits – **How long must I wait**, when will you punish my persecutors? The arrogant dig pitfalls for me, men **persecute** me without cause, they almost wiped me from the earth.

This person is going through a **rotten time**. Persecuted at work, teased and got at for being a believer, or undermined – not especially for being a believer but perhaps that's been the **catalyst** to their opposition. Other people who seem out to get you and give you a hard time. It could work as easily for someone at work or at School. The punchline is that **it's not nice**.

And these two bits of this long Psalm express what this person is thinking and going through and how he or she is **coping**. And so it speaks to us about how to cope.

When we get all worked up, the thing that gets us all worked up **takes up all our energy** and focus and horizon and it becomes our waking thought. It's utterly exhausting and **draining**. In prayer it becomes the first and the last thing that we talk to God about.

But it can really help if we can **talk to God** about something else: About how good God is. A reminder of the **deepest truth** about ourselves.

The Psalmist prays: **Your hands made me** and formed me. I've spoken at great length about this aspect of prayer – it's about **recognising** what's really true. We all know we sin miserably, but we forget that that's not the **deepest truth** about who you really are.

You really are **made in the image** of God, you really are **forgiven**, you **really are** filled with His Holy Spirit, who pours into you God's love. That's the deepest truth and we could do with a creed that reminds us of this and we could do with **beginning our prayers by thanking God for it**.

The **Devil's tactic** to Jesus – **IF**, if you are the Son of God, well then... The Devil's aim is to sow **doubt**, maybe I'm not really made in God's image, maybe I am just a waste of space.

This prayer contains three basic requests. The over arching theme is **please help me**, preserve my life but there are three parts to it. What he wants **God** to do, what he wants **others** to do, what he's going to do **himself**.

He or she, isn't going to do very much. This pray-er is going to **hang in there** and keep praying and reading the bible and that's about it. And he waits and longs for God to answer his prayer.

A while back I was reading vast chunks of it as a **pleasant way of spending time with God** and being reminded of His ways. It sounds a little disrespectful but its not far from the truth to say that I was reading the bible as a **form of distraction**. But at least I was being distracted into something that was **feeding my soul** rather than draining it.

My trick is to have lots and lots of **bookmarks** in your bible so that if you don't feel like reading Jeremiah or Romans you can read some Gospel or Psalms or Ruth. **Jesus'** response to the Devil **is not** to say Well, look, I know who I am and I know that you're a big fibber. Jesus doesn't argue with the devil, He simply says **It is written**, It is written.

We're not well equipped for playing the Devil at his own game. Very often, how we deal with temptation and pressure is by **stubbornly holding on to certain** truths. It is written. Well, go find out what it is that is written and let it feed your soul.

So **lesson 1** is about being distracted onto something that is going to feed your soul. I would, as does this Psalmist, recommend reading your bible. If its **good enough for Jesus** then it should be a good thing for us too!

The Prayer that this pray-er prays is itself quite simple – it's a prayer for **God's unflinching love to be my comfort**, let your **compassion** come to me.

That's it really. He longs to know again, deep down this immense love that God has for you and for me. He knows it in his head and he **wants to know it afresh** in his heart.

Remind me God, that I am loved and held by you. It's a **terrifically simple** prayer. You might expect it to be a bit more profound than that. We find it in worship. Rick Warren in **Purpose Driven Life** says You were planned for God's pleasure – it's a truth that we find difficult to accept – God loves us and He loves us to worship Him.

I think it's amazing that his **prayer for his persecutors** is that they be put to **shame**. Very often in the bible you'll find prayers for enemies to be utterly **crushed**. Maybe it's a sign of the maturity of this believer that he doesn't want **vengeance** himself, he only wants them shamed.

In which case that's very impressive and it points to a **commendable desire to see his enemy converted** rather than crushed. Maybe it's a sign that his enemy is **not some distant** hated people but rather some people from his own tribe. In which case that makes the **pain all the harder to endure** and he knows that a crushing revenge would **not bring about** the kind of long term solution that he seeks.

Many of my prayers tend to be about **what I want God to do** – And I'm not going to knock that – Give us this day our **daily bread!** But maybe its okay to pray these **simple emotional** prayers – please **Jesus help me to feel again** your presence, your comfort, your compassion. It's this comfort that is going to bring healing.

There's this obscure phrase – **wineskin in the smoke** – picture if you can a bottle of wine but not a bottle rather a goat skin bottle – now have it hanging up in your tent as you might – and now have a small fire burning away to keep the tent warm. The smoke drifts upwards and slowly starts to **dry out the wineskin**.

There you are a wineskin and slowly but surely **you're absorbing all the smoke from the fire**, the smell, the stain and it is **slowly drying you out**. You won't really notice it but slowly the cracks and the strain will begin to tell.

It's easy for us to dry out. Sometimes we can dry out **doing good** – a Sunday group leader who never gets a break – always giving, never receiving. It's a prevalent disease in Clergy – the phrase we use is **Burn Out**. And it's a real tragedy when something like this happens. The result is not merely a **tired person**, but a **damaged faith** – oh the church / God / vicar let me down and they never go to church again.

The solution is to **take the wineskin out of the smoke**, yes but the damage has been done. The **cure is to rub oil** into the wineskin – very much like finding a pair of old shoes in the cupboard and wanting to use them again, a good soak in some polish will do them a wonder.

Sometimes we dry out because **we just keep giving**. Sometimes we dry out because we're slowly **absorbing** all this oppression and persecution and it grinds us down and **wears us out** and at the time you're fine but you realise afterwards, **no** you're not fine. You've been all stressed out.

Lesson 1 **Read your bible**

Lesson 2 Keep your **prayers simple**, ask God for His presence, His comfort, His compassion.

**Lesson 3** is May those who fear you **rejoice** because of me, may those who fear you **turn** to me.

It's an interesting expression but **fear of God** is not like other fears – fear of God is the **beginning of wisdom**, it's the beginning of a **relationship** – so this expression is a reference to other members of the family of God.

**We need each other**. That's what **coffee's** all about, its what Home **Groups** are all about. When we looked at **Purpose Driven Life** we saw how we were formed for God's Family – Fellowship is a key part of who we are.

It's why God sometimes brings someone to mind and says Why not give them a call, why not encourage them or see how they are. Its even okay at a **superficial** level – How are you – and its much better at a deeper level.

We need each other, I preach this most Sundays, usually with a call for you to join a **rota** – and that is a very good way to get more **deeply connected** with others here – but perhaps I won't emphasise that today!

But we really **shouldn't underestimate the importance of each other**. The Psalmist prays – may other believers rejoice when they see me! What a great prayer to pray! For us to be **good news to others** and for them to be good news for us.

And then he says May other believers **turn to me** – and that's a curious **call for help**. It's curious because it's passive. The prayer doesn't say May others help me **when I ask for** their help – the implication is that **we know each other well enough** to know that something's not right.

May they turn to me. Now for this to work **we each need to know half a dozen?** A dozen people, that well. So that we can be answers to their prayers, so they can be **answers to ours**.

Lesson 1 was read your **bible**.

Lesson 2 was keep your prayers simple – pray for God's **comfort** and compassion.

Lesson 3 is Look out for each other and **be answers** to each other's prayers! Amen.