

PSALM 107
WANDERING IN THE DESERT?

The right foundations for your life - how would you put a prayer for right foundations into words? It's not something we think about often perhaps, but it is an important question. The questions we ask of parents at the baptism of their child are all about setting right and good foundations for the lives of our children, teaching them and showing them what is good, and important, and valuable. There are times when we ask that question of ourselves: in conversations with friends the subject comes up and we're not sure what answer to give; at crisis times in our lives we are brought face to face with what we consider as important and valuable and sometimes what we once thought is challenged and changed; sometimes our values are challenged, but we don't know where to look for a new, better set of values.

Life is a wonderfully complex and complicated thing. Just when we think we've got it cracked and sorted, something comes along to shake our composure and challenge our priorities. There are hopes and aspirations, plans for future; there are experiences in the past that shape us into the people that we are now; there are people with whom we travel through life, husband, wife, partner, children, friends, fellow-Christians, people who share faith or values; there are difficult situations that we face, that all of us face from time to time, sometimes these are of our own making, sometimes just part and parcel of life; then there is faith, our relationship with God, for better or worse, strong or weak, a vague sense of God being there or a strong faith that influences every day life, or somewhere in between. All of these things make up the complex and complicated phenomenon we call 'life'. We need wisdom to make the most and best of life.

"Whoever is..." (v43) these are the closing words of Psalm 107 offering us wisdom, offering us a foundation for life. The wise person will listen to advice, will be guided, will take note of these things and learn from them. It's wisdom – ultimately, at the root of the whole of life, the foundation of all of life is 'the great love of the Lord'; ultimately the Psalmist believes that God is good. He paints 4 pictures of life, of the kind of experiences of life that people had and have, and that these people discovered for themselves that God is good and that His love is great. Here is their testimony!

1. in the desert: *"Some wandered..." (v4)* Have you ever watched *Ice Cold in Alex*? It's a World War 2 film starring John Mills; a group of soldiers and a nurse try to get their ambulance across the desert to Alexandria before the Germans catch them. It is a classic desert adventure where there are no road signs to tell you which way to go, so they wander around lost and seemingly aimless; it's hot and the heat becomes oppressive and the water begins to run out; mirages make you see water when there is none; there are no landmarks, just more and more sand and they fear that they will never get out of this awful desert. In the Old Testament, the people of Israel had exactly that experience of wandering in the desert for 40 years, the story is told in book of Exodus, with Moses as the leader, and there were times when the water ran out and the food ran out and they complained bitterly that God had left them to die. It is a picture of the experience of life for people in our world, wandering aimlessly through life because they see no way to go, not sure which way to turn for the best; they have no direction and simply wandering from one thing to the next, hungry for direction, wishing that life had a meaning and a purpose but they see no landmarks, no road signs, no wise words that will show them how to live. It brings a kind of hopelessness with it, as if there is no place to settle.

2. in prison *"Some sat..." (v10)* Prisoners, in the gloom and despair of being in prison; they are in chains and they have no hint of freedom; there is an indication that

this plight may be something of their own fault. Some statistics would suggest that suicide rates in prison are about four times higher than that of the general population, indicating that this is a place where despair and hopelessness are rife. Israel were prisoners in a foreign land, having been taken captive; they were in exile, in prison, and wondered if they would ever see their homeland, ever see the light of freedom ever again. That's how life can be for people at times: we feel trapped by our circumstances, trapped by experiences in the past for which we feel guilty or responsible; trapped by our present-day circumstances, poverty, illness and see no way out, no hope for tomorrow; people are trapped by disability, or by frailty, trapped in relationship and can't be free. There are all kinds of ways in which this picture can be reality for us.

3. an epidemic "*Some became...*" (v17) When the Bible uses the word 'fools' it never means people who are silly or unintelligent; it always means people who are perverse, rebels, people who wilfully go their own way. These are caught up in some kind of epidemic and somehow again they have to bear some measure of responsibility for their actions. Some of difficult things people face in life are self-inflicted – how many people are facing the consequences of drug addiction now, the consequences of choices they made years ago? Or others who face the physical consequences of alcohol addiction, again as result of choices they made in the past?

4. at sea "*Others went...*" (v23) Solomon was Israel's wealthiest king; he had a great fleet of ships that travelled the world bringing all kinds of cargoes back to Israel. Anyone who sails the sea knows that you will be caught in storms; even when the sea is calm the feeling of smallness can be overwhelming and certainly in the middle of the storm there is nothing you can do but ride it out; even the most skilful mariner is at the mercy of forces beyond his power. Sometimes we simply feel our smallness in a world full of gigantic forces, we feel caught up in life and that other forces are driving us and we have no control over things, and we are helpless to do anything about it. There are times when any notion of choosing how to live life feels a nonsense because life seems to be closed in for us by forces beyond our control; we feel 'all at sea!'

These 4 word pictures are painted by the Psalmist to describe what life can be like for us. We have tried to link them to something of the history of Israel 3000 years ago at the time when Psalm 107 was written and that may just feel like a history lesson, but there are also times when these pictures just sum up how we feel about life, times when these pictures simply describe our experience of life itself. There are times when we feel lost, or in some kind of prison, or afflicted, or overwhelmed, small and insignificant. So what do we do? How do we set down foundations for life when life is like this? How do we know where to plant our feet when all around us life is confused and complicated?

Psalm 107 has these 4 pictures that are all different. Yet in one way they are all the same. "*Then they...*" (v6,13,19,28) In each case, people who were lost, in prison, afflicted, overwhelmed, cried out to the Lord in prayer in midst of their troubles and God heard them. God answered their prayers and rescued them from all that troubled them. The reason for distress is different in each case, but each time, God hears and answers their prayers; each time, people are rescued. The lost are given direction to find a place to settle and be at home, a city in which to live and be satisfied. The captives are set free, their chains broken. The afflicted are healed, restored. Those at sea are rescued, the storm is calmed and they find a way to the safe haven. Every time the people called out to the Lord, He heard them and rescued them and they were given all that they needed. Jesus rescued the lost, fed the hungry, set captives free, healed the sick, calmed the storms.

"Give thanks..." (v1) People have discovered this for generation after generation, that in the complex, complicated web of experiences that is life, God is able to help; God hears our prayers; God is there to give to us all that we need for life and living of it. It is fascinating to see how Christian hymn-writers have used each of these 4 pictures to describe Christian experience:

"I once was lost but now am found" or "guide me O thou great Jehovah" both take picture of people wandering and are glad that God leads and guides us to settled life; Charles Wesley wrote his own testimony in these words "long my imprisoned spirit lay...my chains fell off, my heart was free..."

Or "ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven" uses the third picture;

"the storm may roar... but God is round about me" or "will your anchor hold... grounded firm and deep in Saviour's love."

"We may be lost, trapped, diseased, or overwhelmed. It may be our own fault or it may not. The Lord may seem to us kind or cruel. Good things happen and bad things happen. But ultimately God is good." (Wilcock p153) This is glorious, ultimate reality that underlies all of life. God's love endures forever. We may not see it; we may think that God has forgotten us or forsaken us; we may think that some of our behaviour has put us beyond pale; we may think that our circumstances are so difficult that nothing can change for us. Yet, no matter all of that, here is the ultimate reality of life – love of God endures for ever. The love that people have tasted for generations; the love that is expressed so profoundly in Jesus giving Himself to die on cross for us; the love that promises to be with us always and everywhere; this is love of God for us. As we plan for the future, as we look back to the past and regret some of our past experiences and their legacy; as we look around at the situations we find ourselves in today and wonder 'how did I ever get here?'; as we look around at the people who travel with us and the joy and the heartaches that our journeying companions bring with them; as we consider the foundations of our lives from time to time; consider this also – the ultimate reality for all of life is that God is with us wherever we go and that His love is endless. The person who is wise sees that, rejoices that God is good and lives by faith in God who has committed Himself to love us forever.