



**Preparation for Worship:** StF 41 Blessed be your name

**Watch on YouTube** <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-nnJCNjHeOg>

Blessed be Your name  
In the land that is plentiful  
Where Your streams of abundance flow  
Blessed be Your name

Blessed be Your name  
When I'm found in the desert place  
Though I walk through the wilderness  
Blessed be Your name

Every blessing You pour out  
I'll turn back to praise  
When the darkness closes in, Lord  
Still I will say

Blessed be the name of the Lord  
Blessed be Your name  
Blessed be the name of the Lord  
Blessed be Your glorious name

Blessed be Your name  
When the sun's shining down on me  
When the world's 'all as it should be'  
Blessed be Your name

Blessed be Your name  
On the road marked with suffering  
Though there's pain in the offering  
Blessed be Your name

Every blessing You pour out ...

You give and take away  
You give and take away  
My heart will choose to say  
Lord, blessed be Your name

Blessed be the name of the Lord ...

**Hymn:** Cornerstone

Watch on YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=55-EQXrDgtA>

My hope is built on nothing less  
Than Jesus blood and righteousness  
I dare not trust the sweetest frame  
But wholly trust in Jesus name

My hope is built on nothing less  
Than Jesus blood and righteousness  
I dare not trust the sweetest frame  
But wholly trust in Jesus name

Christ alone, Cornerstone  
Weak made strong in the Saviour's love  
Through the storm, He is Lord  
Lord of all

When darkness seems to hide His face  
I rest on His unchanging grace  
In every high and stormy gale  
My anchor holds within the veil  
My anchor holds within the veil

Christ alone, Cornerstone ...

When He shall come with trumpet sound  
Oh may I then in Him be found  
Dressed in His righteousness alone  
Faultless stand before the throne

Christ alone, Cornerstone ...

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**Reading:** Psalm 13

How long, Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and day after day have sorrow in my heart? How long will my enemy triumph over me? Look on me and answer, Lord my God. Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death, and my enemy will say, "I have overcome him," and my foes will rejoice when I fall. But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation. I will sing the Lord's praise, for he has been good to me.

## Prayer

O Lord our God, we raise our voices with the psalmist and confirm our faith in you and our total reliance upon you. We trust in your unfailing love for you are unchanging in your faithfulness, the same yesterday, today, tomorrow and forever. Surer than the rising of the sun is the constancy of your love and provision. You will never let us down and we thank you for that provision writ large for us in the beauty of creation all around us; in the person of your son, Jesus; and in the gift of your Holy Spirit in our lives.

Yet, with the psalmist, we echo the thought that sometimes you do seem a long way away or totally absent. It can feel like you have forgotten us or have deliberately hidden yourself from us. When that happens, help us first of all to discern any sinfulness that may be obscuring our relationship with you from our side. Right now, we confess our sins to you and ask that you wipe us clean with your forgiveness that nothing we have done may stand between us and you.

And, when we have done that and still cannot sense your presence, help us to continue standing. We sang, 'When darkness seems to hide His face, I rest on His unchanging grace' and prayed that our anchor may hold within every high and stormy gale. May that indeed be true for us. May we rest upon your promises and trust in your unfailing love until that day when our feelings once again catch up with our certainties.

**Amen**

## Message 'Pain in the Offering'

Do you remember the song called 'The Blessing' which became very popular during the period of COVID lockdown, particularly when recorded individually by many different Christian singers and then threaded together using Zoom or something similar.

The first part of the song is taken pretty much directly from the book of Numbers as words given to the Israelite priests to use when blessing people.

*"The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; the Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace."*

Imagine, though, what it must feel like to experience the opposite. When you do not feel blessed and kept by God. When you do not feel his face shining on you. When you feel no peace whatsoever. Actually, you don't have to imagine because whoever wrote Psalm 13 was feeling exactly like that.

*How long, Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and day after day have sorrow in my heart?*

There is an honesty to psalms like this that the writer Walter Bruggeman suggests can be missing from our churches today. His conclusion is that we are afraid to speak in what we perceive to be negative ways like this because we fear it suggests that God has failed or is not in control. By contrast, he feels that such speaking out can be described as an act of bold faith. Here's what he says:

*It is an act of bold faith on the one hand, because it insists that the world must be experienced as it really is and not in some pretended way. On the other hand, it is bold because it insists that all such experiences of disorder are a proper subject for discourse with God. Nothing is out of bounds, nothing precluded or inappropriate. Everything properly belongs in this conversation of the heart. To withhold parts of life from that conversation is in fact to withhold part of life from the sovereignty of God.*

There are many situations in which people might feel that sense of distance from God or abandonment. The key takeaway, though, is not why such experiences happen to us but that we can speak about them openly and honestly to others and to God. We love hearing people's testimonies in church but usually they speak of victories won or lives transformed by God. Surely, it's just as much of a testimony to say that you're going through a terrible time and only just clinging on by your fingertips but you're still trusting in God's promises and love even though God's face is temporarily hidden from you?

The psalmist holds nothing back in directing their complaint to God and asking that God will remedy their situation: *Look on me and answer, Lord my God. Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death, and my enemy will say, "I have overcome him," and my foes will rejoice when I fall.*

I love the New Living Translation at this point which has the psalmist asking that God will 'restore the sparkle to my eyes'. We all know what it feels like to lose that spark or sparkle within us. We also know what it feels like to be wrestling with our thoughts and to have no rest from them. Any number of things can leave feeling like that. Most commentators agree that it is probably illness and the possibility of death that is involved here and causing the psalmist to feel as they do.

Physical illness can do that or mental health issues or any number of things. I also think there's a certain poetry in the idea that when we feel that God's face is no longer shining upon us, then we stop shining too.

The psalmist doesn't remain silent and neither should we. They cry out for God to do something to take away the torment they are feeling. One commentator has described the three parts of the Psalm as first, pain; then, prayer – those are the verses we've looked at so far – but, finally, praise.

*But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation. I will sing the Lord's praise, for he has been good to me.*

Does that not come as a bit of a surprise? How can the person that has just cried out to God in a state of anguish and perceived abandonment suddenly switch to proclaiming that they trust in God's unfailing love and rejoice in God's salvation? It's not just here that that happens, by the way, but in other psalms too. Psalm 22, for example, begins with those words quoted by Jesus on the cross -

*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?* - yet moves on to a far more positive tone in praise of God's saving power.

In order to understand what's going on in Psalms like these two, let's look at the words of a hymn that we met earlier if you're following the printed service that accompanies this recorded sermon:

*When darkness seems to hide His face, I rest on His unchanging grace, In every high and stormy gale, My anchor holds within the veil*

The reference to the veil is to the veil in the Temple that separated the presence of God from the people and which was torn in two when Jesus died on the cross. The hymnwriter is saying that when we go through the kinds of experiences described in Psalm 13, that darkness in which God appears hidden can feel like the veil is back in place once again with us on one side and God on the other. Nevertheless, they say, at a deeper level than feelings, we must hold on to the fact that we are anchored with an anchor that will always hold because it really is anchored in the person of God.

You probably know the story behind the hymn, 'It is well with my soul'. Horatio Spafford lost his four daughters when their ship sank, yet could write immediately afterwards:

*When peace like a river, attends my way, When sorrows like sea billows roll; Whatever my lot, You have taught me to know It is well, it is well, with my soul.*

For a long time, I had problems with those lines. How I thought could he write as though the loss of his daughters didn't really matter to him? Surely this was a man who was suppressing his feelings and emotions? It was only recently that the penny dropped. This isn't about emotions and feelings but about something at a deeper level than that. I have no doubt that Horatio Spafford was going through real torment in his emotions. He could easily have been feeling the sense of abandonment and of darkness hiding the face of God that we've been talking about. Yet he was given the same insight as the psalmist that at a deeper level than that, his anchor still held and that he could fall back on the unfailing love of God.

Again, if you're using the printed service, you'll be aware that it starts with the hymn 'Blessed be the name of the Lord' written by Matt and Beth Redman. It's a hymn that speaks about worshipping God in the best of times and also in the worst of times.

*Blessed be Your name, When the sun's shining down on me, When the world's 'all as it should be'*

*Blessed be Your name, On the road marked with suffering, Though there's pain in the offering*

*Every blessing You pour out, I'll turn back to praise, When the darkness closes in, Lord, Still I will say, Blessed be the name of the Lord*

These lines came out of the Redman's being in America just after the 9/11 attacks. They came to a realisation similar to those observations of Walter Bruggeman earlier that the church was top heavy with what they describe as 'songs of victory' but that they didn't have much to help people through the emotional shock and trauma of that time.

"The truth is", they say, "the Church of God needs her songs of lament just as much as she needs her songs of victory". And they go on. "A few weeks after 9/11, we wrote the worship song "Blessed Be Your Name." It wasn't written consciously in response to those dark events - but no doubt, being immersed in the spiritual and emotional climate of those days was an important factor in birthing it. Many people ask if there was a particular life event that triggered off the writing of this song, and in all truth, the answer is no. It's really a song born out of the whole of life - a realization that we will all face seasons of pain or unease. And in these seasons, we will need to find our voice before God."

The message of Psalm 13 and the other examples we've looked at today is that it is OK to sound off to God when emotionally we're in a terrible place. It's not just OK but even necessary. As the Redman's said, we need to find our voice before God. But we also need to know that, alongside those tormented emotions, there is a deeper level, whether we call it heart or soul, where we can know that we are anchored and anchored in a God who, even if he feels hidden by the darkness, will never let us down.

**Hymn:** StF 481 The Lord's my Shepherd

Watch on YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=upRoR7ej9Ns>

The Lord's my Shepherd, I'll not want  
He makes me lie in pastures green  
He leads me by the still, still waters  
His goodness restores my soul

*And I will trust in You alone  
And I will trust in You alone  
For Your endless mercy follows me  
Your goodness will lead me home*

He guides my ways in righteousness  
And He anoints my head with oil  
And my cup, it overflows with joy  
I feast on His pure delights  
*And I will trust in You alone ..*

And though I walk the darkest path  
I will not fear the evil one  
For You are with me, and Your rod and staff  
Are the comfort I need to know  
*And I will trust in You alone ..*

### Prayer

How long, O Lord? Can we hide our faces from the headlines of violence and tragedy?

How long, O Lord, can we hide our faces from the headlines of violence and tragedy?  
How long, O Lord, will communities be displaced by war and conflict?  
How long, O Lord, will the poor of this world want for food and the means to provide for their families?  
How long, O Lord, will peoples who are already mostly vulnerable have to contend with the threat of natural disasters and the effects of climate change?  
How long, O Lord, will sickness and death be allowed to triumph where there is no access to adequate healthcare?  
How long, O Lord, will our brothers and sisters in the faith have to live with the fear of persecution?  
How long, O Lord, must the soul of humanity bear the pain of trauma and loss,  
and have sorrow in its heart all day long?

Consider and answer us, O Lord our God! Give protection to all those living in fear of death. Give strength to endure so tragedy will not prevail. Give guidance to decision makers who are on the ground. Give compassion to hearts weary with fatigue.

We trust in your steadfast love, our hearts will rejoice in your salvation, as we participate in your kingdom restoration praying, acting and giving bountifully with all those preparing and repairing what all these things are destroying.

How long, O Lord, will we bring our prayers of lament to you? In the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord we pray.

**Amen**

*(Adapted from a prayer published by Christian Aid in 2019)*

### The Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be your name; your kingdom come; your will be done; on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil. For yours is the kingdom, the power and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen.

**Hymn:** StF 628 Faithful One

Watch on YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JqK-UnsRTFI>

Faithful one, so unchanging  
Ageless one, you are my rock of peace  
Lord of all I depend on you  
I call out to you, again and again  
I call out to you, again and again

You are my rock in times of trouble  
You lift me up when I fall down  
All through the storm  
Your love is, the anchor  
My hope is in You alone