

**Psalm 62: God's Trustworthiness**  
**Notes from a sermon preached at Christ Church Liverpool**

I wonder what questions trouble you about the Christian life? Perhaps you've been a Christian for many years and yet there are still one or two things – or maybe lots! – that puzzle you and that you feel unsatisfied with your answers to. Or perhaps you're not a Christian at all and you have some nagging doubts about whether you could really commit your life to this faith when there are questions still unanswered.

Of course one of the great things about being a Christian is that you stand in a line with believers over thousands of years, many of whom have asked exactly the same questions, or variations on them, that we have. And we have a book, the Bible, where God has revealed his answers to the questions that we need answers to. Not always to all the ones we **want** answers to. And the answers he gives are not always the ones we want to hear! But nonetheless it is a great privilege to be here this morning with access in the Bible, directly, to God's view of the universe, revealed to us.

One of the questions that I find troubles me most as a Christian is this: why on earth is it so difficult to trust God? Why is it that I see all around me – in our church and amongst other Christians – and see in my own life as well, a constant tendency to build hopes and dreams on almost anything except God? A tendency to find security in boyfriend, girlfriend, wife or husband. A habit for deriving our status from our career or income? Why is it that we tend to follow the IKEA slogan and treat children as the most important thing in the world rather than follow the Bible and treat God as most important? Why is it that despite my fine words about being a Christian I tend to set my heart on acquiring this piece of gadgetry, going on that trip round the world, looking like that person in a magazine or whatever? Why is it that despite the Bible's clear and consistent promises of hardship in this life in a fallen world I constantly meet Christians we act and speak as if God and the world owe them something?

Why do we find it so hard to trust God?

Well of course like many questions we can ask in the Christian life there is a simple and entirely true answer – the answer is sin. The fact that our hearts, minds and souls have a natural curve away from God and towards wickedness. That is the truth – but it still doesn't explain how it works. Yes we do, by nature, turn away from trusting God. But how

does that actually come about in our lives? What lies are we believing that lead us to think we cannot trust God?

Those are the questions that the great Israelite King David explored one thousand years BC in this song that we know as Psalm 62. Why do we find it so difficult to trust God? Well David says, the answer is that we forget how different God is to people.

### **1 People are wicked and weightless**

A 2003 survey asked, for a range of professions, who people trusted most. One of the most trusted groups of people, not surprisingly, were teachers (85%).

But before the teachers present start feeling smug about that let me tell you about some research done by the fascinating, and slightly off the wall, economist Steven Levitt, whose book "Freakonomics" you should definitely read if you have any interest at all in finding out why people behave like they do. He looked at the city of Chicago where performance related pay, bonuses and school league tables linked to test results had been introduced in 1996. Using some funky mathematics and computing skills he found that 5% of teachers had engaged in the most blatant form of cheating – actually rubbing out students wrong answers and filling in the right ones on the sheet. He estimated from the data that as many as 35% of teachers had cheated in some significant way – giving extra time, suggesting answers or similar. Levitt's conclusion: that a very large percentage of people will cheat given the right incentives to do so – in this case the possibility of big pay rises. To stop people cheating, he says, you have to make the incentive not to cheat bigger than the incentive to cheat. In Chicago they achieved this by sacking 12 of the teachers whose cheating could be most easily proved. That sent a pretty clear signal to everybody else and the following year evidence of teacher cheating fell by 30% - you might be left wondering how stupid the other 70% of cheating teachers were! Even amongst one of the most trusted professions in the Western world cheating – wickedness – is commonplace.

And what is most astonishing is that so many people, especially it seems, the readers and writers of tabloid newspapers, appear to be constantly surprised by this. Christians should not ever be surprised by people's wickedness. Saddened, grieved, burdened – yes all of those things. But not surprised. Whether it's the 9/11 bombings, the London tube attacks, genocide, burglary, rape, petty jealousy or cheating teachers we should not be surprised or caught off guard. Because that is the universal experience of the human race.

We don't know exactly what life situation David was facing when he wrote this particular Psalm. The most likely time is the occasion when his son Absalom led a conspiracy to take over the kingdom. Absalom was joined by a number of key leaders and advisors in Israel and, for a while, it really looked as though he would succeed in his coup. Well whether it was on that occasion or not David writes this Psalm at a time when his life, and court, were filled with intrigue and plotting against him.

He feels weak and defenceless. Like, v3, a wall whose foundations have been undermined or a rickety old fence that needs only a little pressure to bring it crashing down. His enemies are focussed completely, v4, on trying to usurp David from his position – for their own gain. And though they may come to him with the appearance of loyalty and friendship, inwardly they hate his guts and would like nothing more than to see him toppled.

So often we fail to put our trust in God because we deceive ourselves into thinking that people are more trustworthy than they really are. We abandon what God says for dating that person who isn't a Christian or for telling a lie for the company because we think that person will look after us. Well of course they might...

But the history of humanity gives us plenty of grounds for confidence that many people will betray us, stab us in the back and let us down. Sometimes deliberately and maliciously – much more often negligently or through circumstances outside their control. But people do, consistently, let each other down.

I guess some people might feel this morning that this is a bit of a counsel of despair. That what I'm encouraging is pretty much to have a cynical attitude to people. But I don't think that is what the Bible tells us. Cynicism is incredibly corrosive. It places no final hope or trust in anything and treats life as if nothing and nobody really matters that much at all. That is not what David is saying. Rather the message of the Psalm is realism. It is not to expect the worst of people or even to hope for the worst so our pessimism can be proved right. Rather we are simply not to be surprised when people do wicked things.

That, I think, is pretty much the kind of thing Jesus was getting at when he warned his disciples to be as shrewd as serpent and as innocent as doves. Simply put we will be much less inclined to trust in people rather

than in God if we remember how wicked and treacherous people can be.

And people let us down not just because they are wicked – but also because they are weightless.

Those of you who read the Bible regularly may well feel that this is a topic that gets banged on about rather a lot. All those places where we are reminded that, basically, people are here today and gone tomorrow. As James memorably puts it "we fade away even while we go about our business." And the reason the Bible tells us this so many times is, I think, because it's a truth that runs so counter to our instinct. For much of the time this world seems so solid, so weighty. The power of the rich and mighty seems so real and obvious. The influence of millions of pounds, the awesome destructiveness of the finger of a human being on the nuclear button.

But what does the great King David realise?

That if you put all the people of the world on a set of scales – hundreds of millions of Chinese and Indian peasants, millions of Muslims, Buddhists, Jews, Seikhs and Christians. The mighty and powerful – Bill Gates, George Bush, Richard Branson, Rupert Murdoch, the leaders of Al Qaeda, the IRA, of Russia, France, Germany and Italy. And then if you were to gently puff on the other side of the scales what would happen? All those people would waft up into the air as the balances tipped. They are just a breath, a delusion. As a song we sometimes sing here at Christ Church puts it: we are a moment; we are a vapour.

In our experience the power of the ward manager, the consultant, the head teacher, the partner, the tutor, the SU president, our parents seems so real. It seems so solid. So we tend to make alliances. To cultivate relationships because we think people will be useful to us. We imagine that really everything will be OK because we are in with the right people. But David warns us not to put our trust in such things. Even, v10, when our assets are honestly gained. Not just money gained by extortion and robbery but just general earnings is not to be trusted.

*Though your riches increase, do not set your heart on them.*

We find it difficult to trust God, often, because we are too busy trusting other things. We need to learn from David that to trust anything in this world is to put our lives in the

hands of the wicked and the weightless. And that would be to live like a fool.

But God is different to people...

## 2 God is powerful and loving

As he starts his song David's life is in chaos. He is no ivory tower theologian. He feels the pressures of conspiracy against him, of plots, of people who would love nothing more than to see him come to grief. Maybe that's an experience at least some people here can relate to.

And David finds that disconcerting. For some reason the translators of the NIV Bible that we use here at church (which is, generally can I say, an excellent translation), have, here, inexplicably, missed out a word! V2 should read: "*he is my fortress, I shall not be greatly shaken.*" Contrast that with v6, which says: "*I shall not be shaken.*"

David wants us to know that when we struggle, when we have doubts. When, although we do trust in God, we find our confidence a little undermined and our worries baring down on us, that even then we can find our trust in God renewed.

How? By teaching ourselves truth about God.

In v1 David makes a statement about his beliefs: My soul finds rest in God alone. But in v5 he exhorts himself, he commands his soul, to find rest in God.

One of the most important things in the Christian life is to constantly remind ourselves of the things that we already know to be true.

That is why so much of what we do when we meet together as Christians is about reminding ourselves. We read the Bible to remind ourselves what God has said. We sing hymns to remind ourselves what God says to be true. We take the Lord's Supper to remind ourselves what God has done.

I wonder if we take seriously the need to cultivate our souls. The need to instruct our mind and heart and conscience in what to do and think and feel. In a world constantly encouraging us to put our trust in money, possessions, relationships, work, alliances, careers, politicians, emotions and 101 other things do we take seriously the plainly obvious fact that to counter those lies we need to take time to remind ourselves of the truth.

Given that we are constantly exposed to TV programmes, films, music, books, e-mails and conversations that push us to trusting anything other than God have we really grasped, like King David had, that our souls need care and attention? That we need to remind ourselves of the truth, not just for an hour or so on a Sunday but consistently and regularly.

I know that I need to work much harder than I do at sitting back, turning off the distractions and saying to my soul – you know that feeling you have that you'll be much happier if you buy this. It's a lie. Soul, find rest in God alone. We don't need to do that because God will be more impressed with us if we do it – this isn't legalism – trying to earn brownie points with God. We need to do this because we want our souls to be healthy. Because we want to live with the truth not lies at the centre of our lives.

And the truth is that, in the end, the only truly weighty and solid thing in the universe is God. Look at v7 there. *My salvation and my honour depend on God.* That word "honour" there is sometimes translated "glory" in the Bible. And the origin of that word is the word for weight or heaviness.

Do you see what David has done?

People are weightless. Elsewhere the Bible describes them as being like chaff. Just stuff that gets blown away by the wind. But God gives honour, glory, weight to his people. If you want to be a substantial person, someone whose life will count for something. Someone whose life will still be there in 10 million years time that is not something you can do for yourself. It depends on God. It is by trusting him that our lives will achieve the significance, meaning and substance that cannot be found anywhere else. And we can know that because God has revealed the truth about himself.

V11-12. How many people here can remember the day you first properly moved out of home? I guess for many it was when you went off to university and your parents, misty eyed, drove off in the car leaving you to a new room in a hall of residence. In circumstances like that, of course, there are about 400 things that parents want to say to their children – pieces of advice, words of wisdom. But quite often what people, especially dads, do is say something like "If there's one thing I want you to know it's that..." Well that's what David is doing here – except he isn't just passing on his advice to one person but to a whole nation – to the

people of Israel and to all of God's people down through the ages.

When David says "One thing God has spoken, two things I have heard."... he isn't saying that he doesn't know anything else about God or that God hasn't revealed any other truths about himself than these truths. Rather David is saying: listen up folks. What I really, really want you to remember; if you learn nothing else at all from hearing this song sung; remember this: *God is strong and God is loving*. The simple truths that will help and inspire you to trust God most, David says, are these things that he has revealed about himself: he is strong and he is loving.

David had seen those truths revealed in the words of the Old Testament and, especially, in God's actions in rescuing his people from Egypt. God had smashed the mighty Egyptian army in the Red Sea. He had destroyed every firstborn animal and human in the land. He had sent plagues and worked miracles. God had proved himself mighty. And he had done all this because he was determined to rescue the Israelites. Not because they were bigger, better or stronger than any of the other nations. But just because he loved them.

We too can be confident that God is strong and loving this morning. Because we can know, through God's Word, of the fullest, clearest and most striking demonstration of God's strength and love – we can know of the cross of Christ.

I guess it's a commonplace to us that the cross demonstrates God's love. I guess we know this morning, if you have thought in any depth about the life and death of Jesus, that on that cross he bore in his own body and soul the punishment of God's judgment and wrath for our sin. We know that the cross is God's salvation plan – wrought in love, borne in pain, paid in sacrifice. But perhaps we are less inclined to see the strength of God in the cross – after all doesn't the Bible talk about the cross in terms of weakness? Well yes of course – because the cross demonstrates all kinds of traits that the world finds weak – suffering, servanthood, refusal to stand on rights. But the cross is also a final and wonderful expression of God's strength. It shows the mighty power that can both defeat Satan and then raise Jesus from the dead. It shows an immense moral strength; God is faithful to his promises to rescue people of every tribe, nation and language.

God has revealed himself, in history, to be both strong and loving. So we can trust him.

And we must trust him because he will, finally, reward each person according to what he has done. As soon as they see words like that in the Bible many people imagine that we must be talking about some crude calculation of the relative goodness of different people according to which God gives out rewards and punishments. But to think like that it to totally misunderstand how God defines what we DO.

As far as God is concerned what we do is not fundamentally about whether we help old grannies across the road, sleep around, send money to Africa, hurt our friends, care for elderly relatives or take drugs. As the very first chapter of the book of Psalms reveals as far as God is concerned there are only two types of people in the world. Those who trust him and those who do not. The people who do good are the people who believe and trust in the God of the Bible. The people who do evil are everybody who does not believe and trust in him.

Our behaviour towards others is only a kind of compass as to whether we are people who trust in God. As Jesus himself put it: *the work of God is this; to believe in the one he has sent*.

I imagine that our situations here this morning are pretty varied. Some people probably feel like David – like life is full of hassles and difficulties. That you are tired, worn down, exhausted by the demands of friends, family, work and church. Others may feel things are going really well. That life is good and God's providence is smiling down on you.

In either set of circumstances we can be tempted to put our trust in things other than God. We can be tempted to think that our own resources or the assistance of other people are sufficient to meet our needs. But we need to know that in 100 years time, with eternity stretched out before us, only God will have been worth trusting. Because people are wicked and weightless. And God is strong and loving.

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August 2005*