

The Wrong Way To Think About God

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- [0 : 0 0] Well, I would like us to turn back for a wee while tonight to Psalm 77 and we're going to think about the whole Psalm together. But as we start, I want to read again at the beginning of verse three where it says, I remember when I remember God, I moan.
- Now, that probably doesn't seem like the most inspiring text for us to start with, but please stick with me because I hope it's going to be helpful. As we think about these words and as we think about this Psalm, our title is, The Wrong Way to Think About God.
- Now, I think it's safe to say that all of us and society as a whole, we all spend a lot of time forgetting about God.
- That's definitely true of the culture around us. We mustn't forget that we live in a kind of strange and new era in Scottish history because up until about 100 or 150 years ago, all the major areas of life were full of a focus on God.
- So even though back then not everybody was a committed Christian, it was still the case that whether it was school or university or social care or government or literature or arts, God had a prominent place in it all.
- [1 : 2 0] And it's relatively recent that all of that has changed because today it's so different. In all of these core parts of society, the place given to God has become smaller and smaller and smaller.
- And so as a culture, we have moved on from God. Now, I don't think that that's necessarily because of an outright hostility towards God. I think more often it's just that God is forgotten.
- It's also true of the individuals in the communities around us here in Lewis and really across the Highlands and Islands of Scotland. I would love, I'd love to put out a survey to our community and ask the question, how many times have you thought about God this week?
- And I honestly don't know what the answer to that would be if you were to ask people, how many times have you thought about God this week? But I am pretty sure that the number of people who would say not at all would be higher than it would have been 50 years ago.
- Runrig actually have an amazing song that speaks about this. It's one of my favorite songs. It's called Empty Glens. And the whole song is talking about how people have stopped going to church. Our churches across the Highlands and Islands have emptied over the past 50 years.
- [2 : 4 2] And like all Runrig songs, the lyrics are very, very powerful. And I wanted just to put up some of the lyrics from that song. In the second version it says, science breaking down the door and all the hordes go rushing through for more the thrills of the world and all her idols.
- Just the idea God's been left behind. We're just rushing after a whole new way of thinking. And then later on it asks the question, where have they gone? Where have they gone?
- Gone to illusion. Everyone in the darkest heart, the pride of man will walk alone. People have just gone running after a new way of looking at the world.

People have been captivated by a mindset that focuses on the material and that focuses on the instant. Now, what I mean by that is the fact that today it's very, very common for ultimate reality to be understood in physical terms rather than in spiritual terms.

And it's also the case that for a lot of people, the big questions of life have been put into the background and the thing that matters more is just to hear and know what I can experience, what I can achieve, and all of it just leaves God in the distance.

[3 : 54] So God's forgotten in our culture widely. He's forgotten in our local communities. And I think it's even true to say that as believers and as a church, we can forget about God.

And what I mean when I say that is the fact that as we go into Monday morning tomorrow, the practicalities of day to day living, the busyness of life, all the distractions that are there around us can consume our attention to the point where we actually don't think about God nearly as often as we should.

And I know that I am guilty of that. In fact, we were talking about this at the prayer meeting on Thursday night, the fact that often many of us, and I'm included in that, we get up in the morning and we think that I'm going to pray today and I'm going to pray regularly throughout the day and I'm going to keep focused on God.

And then we hit our desk or we hit our work or whatever, and we reach bedtime and we realize I've had no word of him. That happens to me so many times.

We definitely live in a day when God is being forgotten. So all of that gives me a really easy sermon tonight because I can just say, you need to remember God and everything will be fine.

[5 : 06] Yes? Well, no. And that's the wonderful thing about Sam 77. It's teaching us that it's not actually as simple as that.

It's not just as simple as saying, you know, stop forgetting about God, remember him, think about him and everything will be fine. Yes, we do need to remember God, but it's not that simple.

And this Sam recognizes that. And one of the things that makes this Sam so wonderful is that it's just outstandingly honest and real because it speaks about something that probably everyone in here has experienced at one point, but that probably every single person in here is too afraid to admit.

Sam 77 is telling us that sometimes thinking about God can make you feel worse.

In verses one to three, you've got this very vivid description of the Sam writer in his distress and then he says, when I remember God, I'm moon.

[6 : 24] Now, that seems a wee bit controversial. If I was to just pick that as my sermon title, I remember God and moon. If I was just, that was my words. I don't think I would ever say that.

I think I would think that's too controversial. But the fact that it's right here in the pages of scripture means that we can take that as our text. It sounds controversial, but I think it's true.

Have you ever thought about your prayer life and felt guilty? Have you ever thought about how God is in control of everything, but yet you look at what's happening in your life or in the world around you and you think, why is God allowing this?

Have you ever thought about God's commands and then looked at the moral mistakes that you've made in your life and you felt a huge sense of shame and frustration and sorrow?

Have you ever thought about how God is so good and so kind and he's been so generous and yet you feel like you are such a let down to him? Have you ever thought about God and about eternity and then thought, I am scared about what's going to happen when I die?

[7 : 31] I think all of these are examples of the same thing that's being described in verse 3. They're all situations where thinking about God makes us feel worse.

And I think that actually makes perfect sense because it explains why our society and even our community wants to forget about God.

Because I don't think that people have moved on from God today because they've finally discovered a philosophy that conclusively makes God irrelevant because no philosophy has ever achieved that.

People have moved on from God because thinking about him can make them feel uncomfortable. And this is where we see that the choice that we have to think about tonight that Sam 77 is presenting to us is not a binary choice between forgetting about God on this side and thinking about God on that side.

That's not the choice that's being said before us. The challenge that we face is that if we are going to think about God as opposed to forget about him, then we need to make a choice between thinking about God in the wrong way or thinking about God in the right way.

[8 : 42] These are the two alternatives that Sam 77 sets before us. And they are our headings for tonight. We're going to think about thinking about God in the wrong way, thinking about God in the right way.

And the Sam presents this incredibly powerfully. And in fact, the Sam actually has a secret. There's a secret hidden in this Sam to teach us about how to get this right.

But I'm not going to tell you the secret until the end. So first of all, thinking about God the wrong way. If you look at the Sam, you'll see that it divides quite neatly into two halves.

The first half of the Sam is really quite somber. And I suppose you could say negative. And then the second half of the Sam, there's a change and it's much more positive.

Now that two, two halved structure and content is an amazing reminder of how brilliant the Sam's are because they don't just present the good parts of being a Christian.

[9 : 38] They also speak so honestly about the hard times, the struggles and the sorrows alongside the joyful moments. So we've got this first part versus one to nine set before us here.

And you can actually divide that further into two separate parts, two sort of subdivisions because going from verse one to four here, you've got an emphasis on how things seem rubbish right now.

And then from five onwards to the end, you've got an emphasis on how things seemed so much better back then.

And we can fall into both of those traps very easily. If you look at verse one to four to begin with in a little bit of detail, you can see that the Sam is in trouble. He's trying crying out to God.

It looks very much as though he can't sleep. It talks about being in the night. It talks about his eyelids being held open. We don't know his exact circumstances, but whatever they are, they're overwhelming him and he is in distress.

[10 : 49] And so even though he is thinking about God, the outcome is that he's, the general emphasis just now is that he's not experiencing comfort despite his efforts.

And as verse three so vividly describes, remembering God makes him moan, his thoughts make his spirit faint.

And I think there you've just got the description of someone who's just really disheartened and they're struggling. His sorrow is compounded when he thinks about the past, which you have in verses five to nine, everything then seemed so much better.

Now it seems like God's spurning them like he's forgotten them, like his love has ceased as you can see in the verses there.

Now all of this is so easy to do, to find ourselves thinking about God and all it does is make us think that things are rubbish now and that things were way better back then.

[11 : 53] That can be true of our society. I've heard it so many times people say, you know, that society is going to the dogs. I don't actually know where the dogs are. I think everybody's got their own dogs, but people will always talk in those terms that, you know, things were so much better in the past.

It can be true in terms of church. We can think, you know, it's not as many people coming now as there used to be. We've maybe seen changes in the church that we've found ourselves uncomfortable with.

We've maybe felt like generations before us were in a better place than we are. And maybe as we look out at Carly wages now and see the majority of people not coming anywhere near church, we think we don't have what it takes to reach out and to welcome people in.

So we can find ourselves disheartened about our current circumstances as a church. But I think most of all this kind of mindset affects us as individuals.

We can so easily look at ourselves and all we see is somebody who is a disappointment to God. And maybe things were better in the past or maybe our hopes were higher in the past.

[13 : 01] But now we just feel things didn't go the way we thought they would. I just see mistakes and failures in my life. I've been hurt by other people in ways that I never expected and I've actually hurt people in ways that I never thought I would.

It's so easy for our minds to go down the same kind of path that the first half of this Sam is taking us on. And when I say all that, it is important to recognize that when it comes to these more somber sentiments in the first half of the Sam, it's not all wrong.

And there is a sense in which in some ways it's good. The Bible never ever advocates a kind of, oh, let's just pretend everything's fine kind of mindset. It'll all be great.

Don't worry, everything's fine. The Bible never ever presents that kind of attitude. So when things are hard, God wants us to say that they're hard.

And when we have questions, God wants us to ask them. And so there are ways in which we do need to be more like the Sammestons verses one to nine.

[14 : 09] We should be bothered by the things that are wrong in our lives or in the lives of the people around us. We should be badgering God with our questions and with our pleas that he would be at work among us.

It's not all bad, there is a real sense in which, you know, the thing that's really bad is just to be not bothered at all. And we don't want to have that reaction where suffering and anguish just leaves us not bothered at all.

But at the same time, if all these thoughts just leave us feeling disheartened, if our opinions about ourselves and about our circumstances leave us in despair, if thinking about God makes you moan, then you are thinking about him in the wrong way.

And this is the crucial lesson that I want us to see tonight, that thinking about God should not make your heart sink.

It should not leave you feeling guilty. It should not leave you thinking, I would be better off forgetting about him. But if we're going to avoid all of that, you've got to think about God in the right way.

[15 : 37] And that's what we see in the second half of the Psalm. In verses 10 to 12, there's a turning point in the Psalm. And from this point onwards, the emphasis of the Psalm, there's a much clearer and a much healthier focus on God.

And that change is achieved by the verbs that you see in verses 11 and 12. And it's always good whenever you're looking at any passage of the Bible, looking at for verbs is always a good thing to do.

There's this one, remember, which is repeated twice. And then in verse 11, verse 12, rather, you've got ponder and you've got meditate.

All of these are speaking about a deliberate going over and over and over in your mind as you think about who God is and about what God has done.

Now, I think this is incredibly important because, I mean, maybe I'm the only person in the room who's like this, but my thoughts tend to function like a conveyor belt. And so you've got, you've got thoughts that just kind of come in on this side.

[16 : 44] Well, come in on one side of my mind. They just pass through very quickly and then out the other side of the mind. And that conveyor belt is full of stuff, mostly football and food. And then there's a few other things in between.

So it's like tomorrow morning, football, emails, food, football, sermon, food. And it just goes through my mind, all it goes. And that's how my mind tends to be. You've got this conveyor belt where stuff just flies through all day until you fall asleep.

And maybe you're the same. There's so much for us to think about, so much that goes through our minds. If God is just another thing on that conveyor belt.

In other words, if God just passes through our minds in a few seconds like thoughts about football or work or whatever we're going to do this week, then we're never going to think about him in the way that we should.

We have to let thoughts about God go round and round and round in our minds. And that's what these verbs are talking about, that remembering, pondering, meditating.

[17 : 55] If you think about it, thinking about God is a wee bit like making a loaf of bread. If you take all the ingredients for a loaf of bread, chuck them all in a bowl, quick stir, put them in the oven, what will you end up with?

You end up with a very flat, very hard and not particularly pleasant loaf of bread. Well, you can even really call it a loaf. It's just like a concrete slab of bread. If you want a proper loaf of bread, you need to knead the dough again and again and again and again.

And you need to let it prove. And then when you bake it, it will rise to become this lovely, expansive, big loaf.

And I think that's a good illustration of what the psalmist is doing and what he's trying to get us to do. And the psalmist does it himself. He starts kneading with a K, kneading his thoughts about God as he goes into the second half of the psalm.

And as he does that, he realizes five key things and he describes them in verses 13 to 15. And we're just going to go through them one by one.

[19 : 01] First thing he realizes is that God is holy. In particular, he says God's way is holy. Now, when you hear the word holy, it's an easy word to misunderstand because, you know, we can easily think holy, that sounds like, you know, kind of clouds and smoke and mysticism and all that kind of stuff.

It's not really what you should be thinking about. It's not what you should be thinking about at all when you hear the word holy. When you hear the word holy, you should be thinking of something that is set apart.

And that set apartness speaks of purity and cleanliness and something that is undefiled.

I find it helpful to think of holiness as the opposite of corruption. So if you think of something that's corrupt, then it's not pure.

And if something has been corrupted, then it's no longer set apart. It's no longer different. It's become contaminated. It's become like everything else. Now, you can think of corruption spatially in terms of a physical area or an area of space, particularly in terms of cleanliness.

[20 : 11] A great example is an operating theatre. If you had an instrument on the operating theatre, if it became contaminated so that it was no longer sterile, it has to be removed because that area is spatially incorrupt.

It has to be sterile. But even more importantly, we can think ethically that, you know, if someone's corrupt, their behaviour has become defiled, it's dark and cruel and evil.

And the great tragedy of human history is that that kind of corruption has often increased as power increases.

God is the complete opposite of all of that. He is the complete opposite of corruption.

So that means that he is utterly pure spatially. Now, like I'm kind of at the limits of what I can really adequately describe, because when we're talking about God and the space he occupies, our language kind of just doesn't, our language can't stretch far enough to take that in.

[21 : 25] But for want of a better phrase, if you think of the space that God is in, there's nothing in that space that is unclean or sinful or dark or evil.

He operates in pure, holy, unapproachable space. And he is utterly pure ethically.

So not only is it the case that nothing unclean can come to God spatially, nothing unclean can come out of God ethically. There's absolutely no corruption in God.

That means that his ways are never crooked. They are never twisted. He's never a cheater. He's never a liar. He never spins things. He never betrays people.

He never exploits people. One thing that you can be absolutely sure of with God is that he will always be straight with you. And this is where you have to make sure that you think of God as a good doctor and not as an expensive hairdresser.

[22 : 31] Now, what I mean by that is the fact that if you go to an expensive hairdresser, they are going to tell you that you look amazing, even though you probably look ridiculous. But if you go to a good doctor, they are going to tell you what's wrong.

And they're going to tell you what you need to do. And they will be absolutely straight. That's what God is like. He is straight and fair and true and reliable and honest.

And it's all because his ways are holy. And in terms of the biggest questions in life, is that not what you crave? God is holy.

We also learn, the psalmist and us are also learning that God is incomparable. What God is great like our God.

Now you can just take that statement on its own and it's helpful even as it stands, the fact that nothing compares to God. But I think it's even more helpful if we work the dough on this one even more as well.

[23 : 34] And so the comparisons been made between God and God's, between the real God and idols. And so we can pick a common idol of 2023 and we can compare its greatness to God's greatness.

When we think about the idols that humanity have gone running after, you can really put them into three categories. There's the idol of comfort, the idol of approval and the idol of power.

So when you take the idol of comfort, I think you can absolutely say that there are many people today and that's what they want. They want to be comfortable. Comfortable in their homes and in their jobs and in their finances and in their holidays and in their physical health.

And that desire for comfort is a good thing in and of itself. It only becomes a bad thing if you make it an idol. And that's a very important thing to remember that idols aren't often bad things.

Idols are often good things that you have then elevated to the point where they displace God as the most important thing in your life. And comfort is an idol that lots of people have gone running after.

[24 : 45] I think that if you look at the last 20 or 30 years ago, 20 or 30 years or so, I think that for many people in the West, the ultimate goal is to be pretty young, very rich and more or less retired.

And that's just a great description of comfort, isn't it? When you got plenty money, plenty time and not very much hassle and there's no denying that at first glance it seems quite appealing.

But is it as great as God? Is the temporary comfort of a nice house and a nice car as good as the eternal comfort of being a beloved child of God?

Is the temporary provision of a crack in pension as good as the eternal inheritance that God has promised to all who trust in Jesus?

Is looking forward to another nice holiday as good as looking forward to seeing the sheer beauty and glory and splendor of God in the face of Jesus Christ?

[25 : 47] This is where you've got to remember that every amazing sunset that you see out there, every time you see the sun glistening on the sea, every time you stand under a scarlet sky, it's just a glimpse, a tiny glimpse into the beauty of God.

What about the idol of approval? So many of us love to be well thought of by others. That's something that I struggle with. We want people to think well of us and people look for that, whether it's wanting the guy or girl that you like to like you back or whether it's getting praise from your boss or for somebody else who you admire, whether it's fitting in with your friend group at school or at work, whether it's getting good exam results, even getting lots of likes on social media, approval is so appealing.

But is it as good as having God Almighty look at you and say, I love you?

What about the idol of power? Humans crave power, whether that's power to run a nation or power just to kind of shake your head angrily at somebody who's parked badly at the co-op.

We are so hungry for power and yet so often power is disappointing because humanity, despite all our power, we're still battling against the same problems, against poverty and disease and inequality and corruption.

[27 : 12] And we're still battling to heal so many broken hearts in our society. And one of the reasons why these problems continue is because power is so often misused.

Humans use power to do awful things. Is that better than God? Is it better than the God who is all powerful and who is utterly, eternally good?

There's no God like him. Third thing the psalmist sees, and the next couple are much briefer, is that God is the God who does amazing things. He works wonders.

This raises a really interesting question. Do you want a worldview where nothing amazing can happen? Do you want a worldview where nothing amazing can happen?

And I ask that question because that's what you get if you remove God from your understanding of reality. Because if you think about it, if you push everything to its logical conclusion once you remove God, it means that you stand and you look at a stunning sunset.

[28 : 21] In reality, it's just light going into your eyes, prompting a chemical response in your brain. You see acts of charity towards people who are in need, but really it's a waste of energy because life's all about survival of the fittest.

You fall in love with somebody, but actually it's just an over-excited reproductive instinct. Do you see what happens if you take God out of your worldview? You make it impossible for anything to be ontologically wonderful, and all you have in its place is an illusion, which is exactly what Calum MacDonald recognized in that Run Rick song.

People have just gone after an illusion instead of the gospel. With God, it doesn't have to be like that. You can ground your worldview, ground your understanding of reality on the fact that he really does work wonders.

So an amazing sunset out there, the joy of loving people and being loved, the beauty of showing kindness to others is all just God's handiwork in action.

Fourth thing the psalmist highlights is in the second half of verse 14, the fact that God has made known his might among the peoples. In terms of God's works of wonder, one of the key things he's showing us is that he is mighty.

[29 : 41] In other words, God wants you to know that he is strong. And that's so crucial for understanding who God really is.

He alone is the almighty one. He alone is sovereign. He alone is God. And that's reminding us that every time we put our trust in something other than God, every time we replace God with something else, it means that we are putting our confidence in something that will ultimately prove itself to be not strong enough.

Now, I think there was a really interesting example of that in the news just in the past week because you'll have seen that the whole political world across the globe was shocked that Jacinta Ardern, the Prime Minister of New Zealand, said that she was stepping down.

So for the last five or six years ago, she's been one of the most admired politicians in the world. She's been outstanding in so many ways. And across the globe, she's been recognized as a politician who has really done a remarkably good job.

Last week, she shocked the world by resigning. And the reason she did it was that she was burnt out. She's just not strong enough to maintain it.

[31 : 03] And I've got so much admiration for her honesty in saying that, but it also shows us that even the best politicians aren't strong enough to do everything that needs to be done.

No one can sustain strong, good leadership indefinitely. No one can do it except God.

But God is not just strong. He is using that strength to do something amazing. And that's the last thing that we see. He is using that strength to save his people.

And that's the incredible thing about God. He doesn't display his strength as a showman, as though we're just standing and saying, wow, look how strong God is. Like you admire an athlete or a fast car or something like that.

He doesn't display his strength as a showman. He displays his strength as a savior. And he comes to rescue us and save us forever.

[32 : 06] Now for the Samist, the great example of God saving his people was in the Exodus. So he would look back to the great events of Moses and Aaron and God's deliverance of taking the people out of Egypt, out of slavery and bringing them into the Promised Land.

For somebody, for the Samaritan in the Old Testament, that was the big thing that you looked back to, to see God's work, his saving work in action. We have the amazing privilege of knowing that actually that wasn't the main thing.

That was just a shadow. The Exodus was a shadow of God's ultimate act of salvation. The sending of his son and the work that Jesus did in dying on the cross.

So for the Samist, he's pointing back to the Exodus, but the Exodus is actually pointing to the cross. And it's telling us that if we want to see God saving power in action, we need to think about the cross.

And what I want you to see is that if you look at the cross, there you will see more clearly than anywhere else that God is holy.

[33 : 23] There you see just how serious sin is. There you see that sin must be atoned for with blood. You see that the debt that sin accrues has got to be paid in full.

The stain of sin must be washed away. You see so clearly on the cross that God is holy, but you also see that God is incompatible because you've got this massive debt accrued by us and it's paid by God.

And he pays that debt by handing over his son to die in our place. And that's why when we look at the cross, we see that God is the one who works wonders because by giving his son as a sacrifice for sin, the power of death is broken.

The kingdom of evil is defeated and a world that's so full of brokenness can now become a world that's full of hope because Jesus rose again.

That's the greatest wonder of all of history. That's where God makes known his might more clearly than anywhere else that he's defeated in death and conquered its power and in it all you are discovering that when you look at the cross that God has come to save you.

[34 : 42] He's come to redeem his people. That's the whole purpose of the cross. Jesus has come so that we might be saved. And this is where you see something absolutely incredible.

We've been saying throughout this whole sermon that we can think of God and we moan because we feel rubbish and guilty and inadequate and uncertain and all the rest of it.

And that leaves us feeling lost and we feel insecure and we feel like we don't know what to do and we feel like God's not particularly interested in us. We think of God and we moan. But do you know what the truth really is?

The truth is, is that when sin broke you and broke me, when sin put us on a path to death, God thought of you and he moaned.

Not moaned as enrolling his eyes like, but moaned as in saying, I don't want to lose them. They are too precious to be lost.

[35 : 52] And God was moved by his eternal compassion. He was willing to send his son. His son was willing to go and to die all so that you could be safe as God's precious child forever.

And all of this means that if you want to think about God in the right way, your thoughts have got to go through the cross. And this is so crucial because if your thoughts about God bypass the cross, then they're going to be one of two things.

They're either going to be too, they're going to be too soft or they're going to be too hard. If you bypass the cross, your thoughts about God, they might be too soft where you think, oh, everything's fine with God, I'll be fine.

I can forget about him. Or your thoughts about God are going to be too hard where you think, I've made too many mistakes. I'm not good enough. I've got it wrong. I can't get it right.

And both of these are mistakes because you've got to send your thoughts about God through the cross. And if that's the way they go, if your thoughts about God go through the cross, you will not think about God and moan, you will think about God and you will say, wow.

[37 : 06] Look at what he did for me. You will think about God and you will say thank you because he's done everything needed for your salvation.

You will think about God and you will find peace. If we want to think about God the right way, our thoughts have got to go through the cross.

If you do that, you will see just how much God loves you. So this Psalm is warning us against thinking about God in the wrong way.

It's teaching us to think about God in the right way. But you'll remember that I said there's a secret as to how we're going to do this.

There's a secret in the Psalm showing us how to get this right. Did any of you spot the secret? You don't need to answer that question and don't worry if you didn't.

[38 : 11] I didn't spot it either. I actually only discovered it when I read it in a book. So Derek Kidner who wrote a commentary on the Psalm, he gets all the credit for this. But I think it's really fascinating.

The secret is if you look at this Psalm, remember we said that it's in two halves, a kind of negative half and then a more positive half. Between those two halves, there is a very clear shift from I to you.

So in this first half verses one to nine, the Psalmist is all I, I, I, I, me, I, I, I, but when it turns to the more positive, it's all about you, you, you, you, you.

And I think there's such a brilliant lesson there. If you, if you're seeking the Lord tonight in order for the first time to come to faith, if you're looking for answers, if you're looking for eternal peace, if you want the question of whether or not you are a Christian to be settled forever tonight if you are seeking the Lord or even if you are a Christian but you need to be refreshed and renewed in your faith then I don't want you to go home tonight and pray I'm this I'm that I've done this I've done that I'm not this I'm not that I don't want you to do any of that I want you to go to God and say you you you are holy and you are merciful and you are kind and you alone are God you are strong you do amazing things you are my savior you are my only hope you are everything that I need that is the right way to think about God. Amen.