

## **Trapped in a dark place: Psalms 56 & 57**

Today's Thought for the Day comes from Mark Hackney

Several years ago, working for the charity Open Hands, I was chaperoning a client during a visit to a local hospital. Let's call him John, now in his nineties. We were in each other's company for several hours, and he told me this tale.

As a young man, the Second World War has broken out. John applies to fight by joining the navy. He really fancies the navy. He receives a letter from the authorities. Bad news: he is to be sent to Newcastle. (Now, if any of you have Geordie blood in your veins, I'm not saying this, in itself, is the bad news. Bear with me.)

John is chosen to be a so-called Bevin Boy. He is ordered to go down the mines. The country is desperate for huge amounts of coal to push on the war effort. I think, for a while, one in eight of those conscripted were ordered to do this.

The young John's not having it. He appeals. Set procedure: he must go before a magistrate, who says to John: "I will ask you three times if you will go to Newcastle. If on the third occasion you say 'no', this officer here will take you to the cells."

So, John goes to Newcastle. He is claustrophobic and very afraid. He is not issued with the same quality of equipment as a regular miner. A reinforced cardboard helmet must suffice and he is offered no boots. He mines in his own shoes.

He suffers a pit collapse. His greatest fear.

Can you imagine? Forty-eight hours alone in pitch blackness, never knowing if help will arrive. In the long hours, not a soul to draw upon, but yourself. The dank smell, and your only companion the distant, desolate, slow drip, drop of water. You wake from an intermittent sleep, whereupon the dreadful reality of your situation crashes in on you yet again.

John is not a Christian. It is heart-breaking to think that John didn't realise: all that time he was sat, terrified, trapped in the mine his God was sitting next to him.

Tragically, John, a lovely man, could not draw on that comfort.

**Psalms 56 and 57 reveals to us that *we can*. Indeed, psalms 56-60 show a narrator under incredible pressure, but they teach us how, through interacting with God, we can refine our character, grow, and gain great comfort. “When I am afraid, I put my trust in you” (Psalm 56.3).**

**We may employ our devotional imagination, adopt a viewpoint, and see David, writing these two psalms in dark places: 56 while imprisoned by King Achish; 57 in the cave of Adullam, hiding and covered (‘miktam’) from King Saul. Thus, David too must feel as if he’s trapped down a mine.**

**Yet, though David feels in the dark, he will defiantly worship his God: “In God, whose word I praise, in the Lord, whose word I praise” (56.10).**

**Plus, in the most exquisite imagery, he says to God: You have “put my tears in your bottle. Are they not in your record?” (56.8).**

**David believes, knows, that the God of light is the ultimate reassurance. The darkness cannot hold against God’s truthfulness and His commitment to each of us.**

**And, during lock-down, if we feel currently trapped in something of a dark cave or mine, we may reflect on the all-encompassing light of: “For your steadfast love is as high as the heavens; your faithfulness extends to the clouds” (57.10).**

**We can see why “Do not be afraid” is such a common Biblical command: God is great on earth and in the heavens. Psalm 57 begins with a prayer for God’s grace and finishes each half with a prayer for God to rise above the heavens and for God’s honour to be over all the earth.**

**I mustn’t leave you with John still trapped down his mine. Post-war, John goes on to have a busy life, raising a family. He was an engineer during the day, and to raise cash, in the evenings he played drums in a band touring the northern clubs. Drawing upon the latter, he related some anecdotes to me that I can’t possibly share with you here! All I can say is that I could feel the other patients in the waiting room**

leaning-in to listen to John, smiles betraying their happy eaves-dropping.

But it leaves me sad, that John's lived a life without knowing, or at least having a realisation of, God.

And God loves John, would have loved to have helped him with the fears and stresses life inevitably hurls at us – when we may feel as if we are trapped down a dark mine.

But, you and I, can be receptive to the daily restorative power of God's love. We see the light. Thus, we can shout:

“My heart is steadfast, O God,  
my heart is steadfast.

I will sing and make melody” (57.7).

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