

Psalm 105

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[0 : 0 0] Praise the Lord. Give thanks to the Lord for he is good. His love endures forever. Psalm 106 goes on to say. What we're going to think about this morning is probably actually quite counter-cultural.

Here's some of the sound bites, the zeitgeist, if you like, of the modern. And probably if you were watching Ireland yesterday, as I was, bidding for the number one place and getting absolutely whipped by England.

You're only as good as your last match. Have you heard managers say that? Never mind the record before, you're only as good as your last match. You're only as good as your last sermon, some churches say, of their pastor.

In the back pages of the newspaper, in the investment section, if you're so inclined. Past performance is no indication of future growth.

As we watch the stock markets plummet. There's an awful lot about living for the day. Living for the moment.

[1 : 1 7] And indeed, I suppose quite naturally in our thinking, one of the questions I'm sure, if we could write it down in that question box, would be, Where is God leading me?

What does God want to do in my life? Where will I be in a year's time? What should I do? Lord, what do you want me to do? I've got to tell you that if at 16, I had been told that I would be an ordained pastor and a teacher, I would have wept.

I couldn't have thought of anything worse at 16. I don't know about you, but I find I'm not one of those people who very often in my life has been able to say, This is absolutely what God wants me to do and where God wants me to go.

Now, there have been occasions, there definitely have been occasions, where we've sought and we've prayed and we've fasted and we've asked God to guide us. And we have sensed a leading.

But for me, the way it seems to work, and I don't know if you think this is wrong, but it just seems to be the way it works for me. It's when I turn and I look back that I can see that I was guided all along.

[2 : 3 1] That doors opened and God put people into my life and, you know, coincidences, except they weren't coincidences, they were God incidences. And at the time, I wasn't very sure about it.

I wasn't sure where the direction and the path was going. But when I look back, I can see that I have been guided clearly. I don't know if that's your experience.

So we seem very future orientated. We don't like to talk about the past too much. The past is passé. And then there are rare moments when suddenly we do remember.

We make remembrance our focus. Four years ago, I was very, very fortunate. My father was a World War II veteran. And he got invited, and he was allowed to bring somebody with him, so it was me, across to London from Northern Ireland for the 70th anniversary of VE Day.

And there was a service at Westminster Abbey and a two-mile walk, which he absolutely insisted upon doing, along the mile and into St. James's Park. There was a reception there.

[3 : 40] He got to meet Prince Charles. He actually had a golden 15 minutes where he chatted to Prince Charles for quite a wee while and then was walking across the lawn.

And they'd had all these 1940s dancers, you know, all done up in the gear. And the press were taking photographs of them. And one of the press said, get the old guy in the middle. And I've never seen a 90-year-old man drop 40 years or 50 years in about 10 seconds.

The walking stick, hold that, Nick. And he was right in there in the middle of them. But the best thing about that was as we were walking together up the mile, you know how, as you get older, people seem to mumble more.

You know, newsreaders don't speak as clearly. And people were shouting things. They were shouting things from, you know, the streets were absolutely packed. And dad said to me, what are they shouting, Nicholas?

What are they shouting? Do you know what they were shouting? They were shouting, thank you. Thank you. Thank you to all these old guys and girls who were marching up, probably for the last procession ever.

[4 : 54] Because they were looking back and they were remembering that that was a time of peril and a time of deliverance. And they were saying, thank you.

And Psalm 105 is a thank you psalm. It's a remembering psalm. It's about looking back in order to look forward.

The Jewish faith is particularly good at this. So they tell the stories and they retell them and they retell them. And in fact, you will know that it was a command.

And as you're walking down the street, tell the stories. Remind them of the commandments. Write them in your doorposts. Tie them around your arms. Tie it around your head. Whatever you do, don't forget the stories.

Don't forget God's covenant. Don't forget God's law. And Jewish families will gather together every year at Pisa or Passover.

[5 : 56] And why is this night to be remembered amongst all nights is the question. And they go through a ritual of retelling the story. They tell it in word. They tell it in symbol. They tell it.

I was quite glad that Haman was mentioned because the festival of Purim is a Jewish festival. They all gather and they reread the story of Esther and Haman.

And I've seen, I'm sure this doesn't happen maybe in Orthodox synagogues, but in liberal synagogues, I've seen a video of a service. And they're all fancy dress.

They dress up as one of the characters from the story. And every time Haman's name is mentioned, they either blow raspberries or there's a rattle, you know, to drown out his name. They remember the story.

They go to extraordinary lengths to remember the story. Because that is when God came through for them. Tell the story, the traditions of Abraham, of Isaac, of Jacob.

[6 : 56] They remember them not just for who they were, great patriarchs, great people of faith, but for who God was for them. And I know for some of you, this is cool to Newcastle.

You know this stuff better than I do. But just in case you don't know what the word covenant means. Covenant, it is a biblical expression, but actually it was quite common in near Middle Eastern history.

It simply meant a treaty or an agreement. And the Jews believed three things, well, at least three things about God. One, he was a creational God.

Now, that wasn't unusual amongst Middle Eastern religions. Lots of religions believed in some kind of creator God or gods. Secondly, the Jews believed in a providential God.

That means a God who got involved with human affairs. Now, that again wasn't that unusual a belief amongst the other religions. You know, they would quite often believe that God could smite or God could make a harvest grow or whatever.

[8 : 01] But what made the Jewish people unique was that they believed in a covenantal God. A God who entered into relationship with his people.

And the covenants often have a binding promise. I will if you will. I will be your God if you will be my people. I will be your God if you keep my commandments.

So, there's a bind sort of on both sides. So, they remember the covenant to Abraham. In fact, the very, very first covenant was to Noah.

And each covenant has a sign as well, a seal on it. And the seal of the covenant to Noah is the rainbow. I will never flood the earth again. To Abraham, he says, I'm going to give you many descendants.

That's my promise to you. It's renewed to Isaac. It's renewed to Jacob, whose name is changed and he becomes Israel. And then it's renewed again through Moses.

[9 : 03] And here we have in Psalm 105, more or less, the whole story. From grandfather to father to son. And then 400 years to Moses.

In verse 42 of Psalm 105, it says, God remembered his holy promise given to his servant Abraham.

That's when Moses hits the rock and water flows out. So, God remembers, and my biblical arithmetic might not be just absolutely tip-top, but God remembers a promise he gave 700 years ago to Abraham, roughly.

And then 700 years later, David is saying to his people, because we believe that David wrote this Psalm, he's saying, you've got to remember. Remember, remember God's goodness, God's deliverance, God's salvation.

And the Jewish community, 3,500 years later, are still remembering every Passover. The things that we've read about in Psalm 105.

[10 : 14] You see, with God, past performance is an indication of future growth. We look back and we see what God has done in order to move forward.

There's a tribe in South America, I believe, quite like their thinking. They are moving through time, metaphorically, backwards.

So, when they talk, and I have to read this out. They're in the High Andes, by the way, if anybody wants to look them up. They're called Amaira. Their word for future, and please correct my pronunciation if you know Amaira, is Gipapacha.

That's their word for future. And Gipapacha means behind time. The future's behind them, because they can't see it. So, when they talk about the future, they actually point backwards.

And when they talk about the past, it's Naira Pacha. It means Ford time. So, when they talk about the past, they point in front of them. Because we don't know what's going to happen, even later on today.

[11 : 26] We may have plans, but we don't really know what's going to happen. But we can look back and see what has happened, and identify how God has delivered, and has rescued. Because he is the I Am.

The old, what is it? The old hymn says, For I know who holds the future. And he holds it in his hand. With God, things don't just happen. I used to sing it, For God, things just don't happen.

And that's not right. For God, things don't just happen. Everything by him is planned. God says to Moses, I am.

I am the eternal present in a way that you and I can never be. He was as much present in the past as he's present now. And God is here and is present in the future.

Now, I was born 1969. I know I don't look good. I can trace my family back to 1807. But I know very little before that.

[12 : 34] I am one person in time. But God was as fully with my great-great-grandparents as he was with my great-grandparents and my grandparents and with you and with me and with the generations before.

In fact, I think it says, verse 8, he remembers his covenant forever, the word he commanded for a thousand generations.

Psalms 105 says, trust the one who holds the past and the present and the future together. Here's something I kind of, I suppose I run past the kids.

This is my mathematics. It's still probably not perfect. We are told, we are told by NASA, whether you believe it or not, there are 100 billion suns in our galaxy.

100 billion suns. And they estimate, they estimate that there are 100 billion galaxies. And that's 100 with 23 zeros after it, apparently.

[13 : 43] And if you divide that between 7 billion people on the planet, so you and I get our star kingdom each, each one of us, and you go and visit your star kingdom bit by bit, and you can travel instantaneously between them, so you spend a day on each of your stars, it would take you 39 billion years just to visit the stars assigned to you.

I don't know if you like my maths or not, but what my Bible says is that he calls them out one by one, and by his power not one of them is missing.

He doesn't just hold the future and the present and the past in his hand, he holds the whole of creation in his hand. And what's best of all, he's a covenantal relationship-making God with you and me.

I don't know where you are this morning. I don't know if you're discouraged in your faith or greatly encouraged in your faith. I don't know if you're feeling very close to God or you're feeling very far away from God.

I don't know, it may be that you don't know that relationship with God through Christ that I'm speaking about this morning. But what I would like this morning for the next little bit, and I don't think it should finish when I stop speaking, is to be a time of telling stories of faith, encouraging each other with our individual walk with God about where you've seen God at work.

[15 : 16] Because it's by remembering these things that we can engage with others, but we can also re-engage with our faith. Remembering when God has been faithful.

Because sometimes you can be in a situation and because it's the immediate and it's the present, it feels overwhelming or it feels maybe that God isn't there. And what we do is we look back and we say, God is faithful.

As he was faithful to Abraham and to Isaac and to Jacob for generation after generation after generation, he is faithful and will be faithful to me. The future, I can't see it, it's behind me.

The past, what he has done is all in front of me. And so I'm going to ask you, I don't know whether you, do you do tea and coffee afterwards as well? Or folks are like, do you know what? It would be great to talk about the rugby yesterday.

And yes, well done Scotland. Yeah. And didn't Liverpool do well? And yeah, what are you doing this week? And all that. How about we just for once go up, if you're comfortable, and ask somebody, tell me a story about faith in your life when God was really very real for you.

[16 : 31] And as that person tells the story, they'll remind themselves. And as they tell the story, they'll encourage you. And as a congregation, we'll be encouraged to know that God has been faithful.

And these just aren't stories from the dim, distant past that he's the same yesterday, today, and forever. And I think that probably would be far more of an encouragement to faith than some 50-year-old Irishman standing at the front and talking for possibly too long.

You do the ministry. You share with people. I'm going to tell you two quick stories. And these are just examples, because they don't need to be big, big, you know, I was at death's door stories.

Although they're very good as well. But here's one. You'll maybe not even think this is God. You'll maybe think this is too trivial. I was in cool rain. I was dropping my son off at a Northern Irish Scripture Union camp.

I have managed to brainwash him into thinking that he's a Northern Ireland boy in exile. So he goes to Northern Irish Scripture Union camps. He actually, bizarrely, in the way that only Northern Irish Scripture Union could do, he goes to a Northern Irish Scripture Union Scottish camp.

[17 : 41] Which used to meet in Edinburgh. So he would leave him off in Northern Ireland so Scripture Union could take him to Edinburgh. Now, they can't go to Edinburgh anymore so they go to Bullingar which is in the south of Ireland.

So it's now the Northern Ireland Scripture Union Scottish camp meeting in the south of Ireland. Anyway, we took him across. I'm from Colerain. I don't know if you like golf but that's four miles from Port Rush where the Open was held for the first time since 1951.

It was all the news in Northern Ireland. It was the biggest thing. Tickets were sold out nine hours after they went on sale. So, we're there. We happened to have a free day.

Bit of dad-son bonding time. What would you like to do before I drop you off at camp? No. Well, come on, let's do something now we're here. No.

No. Well, shall we go to Port Rush? We'll just soak up the atmosphere. No. No. So, we go to Port Rush and don't expect you to know Port Rush but you can actually see part of the course from the road.

[18 : 48] So, we were standing on the road not having paid to get in and we're watching Rory McIlroy and some of the greats tee off down the second fairway thinking, that's really good. That's quite good, Johnny. Guy comes up from inside the course, says, would you like a ticket?

I said, yeah. He said, how much? He said, no, no, just have it with my blessing. I'll take it. I said, oh, but there's two of us rapidly thinking, could I get rid of him some way?

Here's a fiver, go and have an ice cream, son. And he said, well, here, we've used one of them and we haven't used the other. Take two. He said, maybe you can tell them that you, you know, invent some story.

He says, by the way, you have to pretend to be Kieran McCann. to the ticket office. And Johnny's woken up by this time, because it's almost 11 o'clock, and he's saying, maybe you could say that we got separated and you went in and had to come out again.

Or maybe, I don't know. And I'm thinking, you know, well, I can't do this. I can't do this. I do love my golf, but I can't do this.

[20 : 06] So I just went up and I said, Johnny, here's my strategy. I'm just going to be completely and utterly truthful with the guy. I went up to the ticket booth and just said, listen, I'm not going to tell you a word of a lie.

Some random person called Kieran McCann has just given me this ticket for free, no money exchanged hands. That's not who I am. And I can't use the ticket unless I get one for my son here.

And the guy goes, you're joking. He said, the ticket sold out nine hours after they went on sale. I said, okay. Well, I said, listen, I was blessed with a ticket for five minutes.

Take it, give it to somebody, give it to the next person who comes along and inquires about a ticket. He said, what age is your son? Fifteen. Just a moment. Went, printed off a fresh ticket, gave it to me.

Two of us are in watching the British Open within five minutes on the 18th and for 15 minutes and it's a precious 15 minutes if you've got a 15-year-old son. I was on a pedestal.

[21 : 07] I was up there. How did you do that, Dad? Now, where was God in that? I think God was just honoring me for being honest and not valuing a very, very precious Port Rush Open ticket ahead of telling the truth.

And what a tremendous example to be able to set to my boy that actually telling the truth, you know, okay, sometimes it doesn't work in terms of you don't get what you want, but it's always the right thing to do, even to be prepared to hand back a ticket.

So that's one story. That's to show you how trivial it can be, except it's not trivial ever where God is involved or God is honored. So you be thinking about what story you could tell.

Last one. Do I still have time for one more? That was one. No, no, no, one story. I was privileged to go to South Africa with a rugby tour for the school, went as chaplain, but I was flying back because we support a charity in Zimbabwe, so I was flying back via there, and I was catching a British Airways flight back home from Joburg, Joburg via Heathrow up to Edinburgh, and I'd booked extra leg room because I have bad knees from playing rugby.

It's about 60 quid more, and it was one of those lovely occasions where there was a woman in the window seat and a completely free seat beside me, and I'm sitting in the aisle with my legs stretched out, and at the very last minute, this young woman bags all everywhere, comes in, plants herself down in the seat, and oh, just made it, just made it, she said.

[23 : 01] And what a good seat, she said. I didn't even pay for this. And we're chatting, I said, well, where are you going? She said, I'm going to Edinburgh.

I said, so am I, so am I. And she said, I hate flying, so do you mind if I grab your leg during take-off?

You have to sometimes suffer for your ministry. And then she said, if I fall asleep, if I fall asleep, I might loll over you. Just feel free to nudge me in the ribs.

I said, what are you doing? Are you visiting Edinburgh? She said, no, I'm leaving South Africa for the last time. We're emigrating, and I'm going to live in Linlithgow. She said, what do you do?

I said, well, I'm going home. I said, I'm a chaplain at a school in Edinburgh. Oh, she went, you are God's gift to me. Now, in fairness, I have heard that one or two times in life.

[24 : 07] But what had happened is her husband and her had just become Christians about a year ago, and they were praying in the airport before they came that she would be sitting beside a Christian who she could ask about churches to link up with in Edinburgh.

And yes, I actually did mention Brunsfield, but I think they're going to St. John's now in Linlithgow, because that's where they live. Now, that's just a little, you know, a couple pray and they get a gobby Irishman to answer the prayer and sit beside.

God is faithful. God has answered those folks' prayers. He wanted to be faithful to them and get them into a fellowship in Linlithgow. The funny thing is when we got to Heathrow, she got through security quicker and she was FaceTiming her husband.

And she was going, yeah, and I've met this guy on the plane and he's just God's gift. And she said, here he is. And there's this big really mountain of a South African guy going, I'm going, hi Nick, I'm married, three children, nice to meet you.

Yeah. How has God worked in your life faithfully? How has God been faithful to you? What story are you going to tell to a person over tea or coffee?

[25 : 23] How are you going to encourage a community of faith and encourage yourself by remembering God's covenant to you? And if you really can't think of anything, then as you forget for a moment about tomorrow, you look backwards and as we were singing, you look at the cross.

You look at the cross and you tell stories and remember Christ's sacrifice for me and for you on the cross, in my place.

You remember his words to the thief on the cross, today you will be with me in paradise. And you remember that that was for you. Just as actually those old soldiers walking down the mile four years ago were remembering people that they knew friends who had laid down their lives.

Christ, your friend, Jesus, your friend, laid his life down for you. He is faithful and remembers that promise, remembers the promise that he made, that all who come to him and confess their sins, he is just and will forgive them from all unrighteousness.

Remember that. Write it down somewhere, write it on your wall, tie it in your arm, talk about it as you're walking down the street with your grandchildren or kids or your friends or whoever.

[26 : 56] Look back and remember God's faithfulness and be encouraged for today and take hope in tomorrow. Let's pray. Father God, God, I pray that actually these next five, ten minutes will be refreshing, will be faith inspiring, will give hope where hope is needed, encouragement where encouragement is needed, challenge where challenge is needed.

And by your spirit you would do your work in your way in our lives in this place. Amen.