

Embrace God's Plans for His World

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[0 : 00] Well, good morning, folks. Really good to be with you all here this morning. I don't know why, but as I was driving here this morning, I wasn't thinking that I would arrive and see so many familiar faces.

But it's really good to see also familiar faces. Even Keita, who was speaking to us earlier, we just worked out that I know her dad.

So that's nice. There's not many follow-wills in the world, I guess. But today, as Alistair said, we're continuing your series in the Psalms.

Before we get to that, I'd just like to tell you a little bit about myself and where I've come from. So this morning I came from Kirkliston, just outside Edinburgh, where I live with my wife and our four kids.

I worship at Kirkliston Community Church, and I want to thank you as a church for giving us some of your best people. Because the Johnsons, who were members of this church for a long time, are in KCC.

[1 : 08] And also, I think we stole your youth pastor, but then again, you've got Peter. So it must have been quite a while ago that Pip, Lynn, was here as youth pastor. So she's now youth pastor at Kirkliston Community Church, where we worship.

I'm married to Jude. We've got four kids. Jude's a primary teacher. And we have Katie and I, who are twins, age 10. Anna's 7. And little Struhan is 21 months, and he has to be sat on to have his nappy changed at the moment.

He's bonkers. So it's nice to get a break from them this morning. Only joking. I have the privilege of teaching at the Faith Mission Bible College, which is in the south part of Edinburgh in Gilmerton.

And I'd like to just tell you very briefly a little bit about it. The Faith Mission Bible College is part of a wider organisation called the Faith Mission.

It would be very interesting for me if you could raise your hand if you've heard of the Faith Mission. Oh, loads of you have. Wonderful. Now, I'm not just talking about the cafe and the bookshop.

[2 : 18] So the Faith Mission was set up over 100 years ago as a mission organisation with a unique calling, or a specific, particular calling, to reach the lost of Great Britain and Ireland, of the UK and Ireland, with the good news of Jesus Christ in rural areas.

And that's still the focus of the Faith Mission today. The last great move of God in Scotland was the Lewis revival, the Isle of Lewis in the north.

And one of the key individuals in that revival was a man called Duncan Campbell. He had been a faith mission worker, faith mission evangelist, then became Church of Scotland minister, and later he became the principal of the Bible College.

And that sense of mission, that focus on evangelism, that desire for God to come again and work in us and through us and among us and in this nation is still very much at the heart of what the Faith Mission is about.

And so we have a Bible College to train people for the mission. But again, one of your former assistant pastors trained at the Faith Mission Bible College, Alistair Chalmers, he's now at Fernie Hill Evangelical.

[3 : 33] And so students come to us for training in all kinds, to go into all kinds of Christian ministry, but many do go into the Faith Mission as evangelists.

That's me on the screen there. That's me teaching a course on apologetics. And look, the people are absolutely gripped. So our vision is to train passionate servants of Jesus Christ for evangelism, mission, and ministry.

And so every day I arrive at the college and I meet with my colleagues and we open the scriptures together and we pray together. And then we pray for the students, we pray for the day, and then we go and join the students.

And one of them leads us in morning devotions and we worship together and we pray together. And then we spend the rest of the day studying the Bible and theology together in Christian community and fellowship.

Does that not sound wonderful? Well, my friends, you could join us. So if you've thought for years, I would just like to have the opportunity to go a bit deeper, to study God's Word and all that it teaches us just a bit more deeply and with some more structure and more discipline.

[4 : 57] Well, you could come and join us just for one day on the 21st of September. My colleague Marilyn Burton will be teaching a one-day course on the Old Testament, how the whole Old Testament points towards Christ.

And it's free. We'd love to see you there on the Saturday, the 21st of September. But maybe you would like to go deeper than that. Maybe you could spare a Tuesday, even just half of the Tuesdays in a year, and join us for our Foundation Certificate in Applied Theology.

Two years to cover systematic theology, Old Testament overview, New Testament overview, Christian history, and then practical courses like children and youth ministry, pastoral care, evangelism, apologetics.

So that's the advert over. But there's an opportunity at the Bible College just up the road from you if you have the time, maybe a sense of calling even on your life to serve God part-time or full-time in mission.

And there's an opportunity to come and join with this Christian community and study God's Word together and see where He leads us all. So advert over.

[6 : 20] It's lovely to be with you this morning. We're going to dive in now to Psalm 117. Well, actually, before we start, I want to just ask you a question.

How do you feel about what's going on in our world at the moment? It's quite difficult, isn't it? Watching the news, wars and the threat of war, riots in the streets, and deep, deep political divisions.

And a culture that in many respects has completely rejected its Christian heritage. And a church, not this church, but many churches in our nation, most churches in our nation, in free fall.

Are you ever tempted to let fear and anxiety and worry overcome you when you look at what's going on in our world and even in our own nation?

Do you ever wonder, Lord, what would you have me do about all of this? Well, I think our psalm this morning contains God's antidote to the chaos.

[7 : 40] To the chaos around us in the world, the chaos that we might feel within us. So we've read Psalm 117. Do open it.

It is, you may have noticed, rather short. It is, in fact, the shortest psalm. It's the shortest chapter in the Bible. It's been called the Tom Thumb of the Psalter.

But that may be so, but it does not lack anything in significance. Just two verses. And yet, the great reformer, 16th century reformer Martin Luther, managed to write 36 pages of commentary on it.

You'll be pleased to know I've only got 11. Another commentator said, this is the shortest song in the whole collection, but there is none greater or grander in its expression of praise.

Again, another said, it's a dewdrop reflecting the universe. And part of what makes this tiny psalm so great is that it contains God's antidote to the chaos out there and the chaos in here, the despair that we might feel in a chaotic world.

[8 : 56] So let's just read it again, because it really won't take long. I'm reading from the English Standard Version of the Bible.

Let's just read this short psalm again. Praise the Lord, all nations. Extol him, all peoples. For great is his steadfast love towards us.

And the faithfulness of the Lord endures forever. Praise the Lord. And I think, as I've been thinking on this and praying through it, I think the message that God has for each one of us this morning is through this psalm is, no matter what's going on in the world around you, let yourself, let your heart, let your whole life be taken up in God's great plans for his world.

That's God's antidote to the chaos. So we're going to think about this in three steps this morning. Firstly, firstly, don't despair when you look at the chaos in God's world.

Even when the world seems full of turmoil, do not despair. Praise the Lord, all nations. Extol him, all peoples. Now, I heard as folks are arriving this morning, there's quite a few visitors this morning.

[10 : 25] So it's so great to see you here today. Those of you who've been here for the last five weeks will know very well that we are working through a series in the Psalms.

And this, we started off, and you started off, in Psalm 113. It finishes next week with Psalm 118. And this short section of the Psalms is known as the Egyptian Hallel.

The Egyptian Hallel Psalms. And the reason they were called this is an ancient tradition to sing these Psalms around the Passover meal. So the Passover was the most important of the Jewish festivals where God's people celebrated the Exodus, the rescue from slavery in Egypt.

And Hallel simply means praise. So the Egyptian Hallel. So these were songs of praise to God for his deliverance of his people from slavery in Egypt.

And they would sing them around the Passover meal. So they would sing Psalms 113, 114 before the meal, and after the meal, Psalms 115 to 118. Now, again, very cleverly, I think, this series has been entitled From the Lips of Jesus, which I confess, when Graham first sent me the invitation to speak and I saw that title, I thought, wait a minute.

[11 : 47] I'm going to have to look into that. But it's hugely helpful because, of course, the Last Supper, which has been in the news for the wrong reasons recently, the Last Supper was a Passover meal.

And this is fascinating. So we read in the Gospels that after Jesus had taken bread and wine with his disciples and told them, this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins, they'd just done that together.

This absolutely core and epochal event in the history of mankind. And then they sung a hymn together, we're told. Well, since from time immemorial, it was the Egyptian Hallel Psalms that were sung around the Passover meal.

We can only assume that it was these very Psalms that came from the lips of Jesus that night, just before he went to the cross to die for the sins of the whole world.

Well, that helps us read these Psalms a little differently, doesn't it? So what do you think was going through Jesus' mind as he sung Psalm 117 that night?

[13 : 05] Despair? As a first century Jewish person, an ordinary person living in Judea in the first century, there was every reason to despair.

Like, you had been living for decades, 70 years, under oppressive Roman rule. They were brutal, and they were powerful, and they were clearly not going anywhere for a long, long time.

And it had been 400 years, 400 years, since God had sent a prophet to his people. And while they waited, empires ruled them.

There were wars, there were massacres, and there were all kinds, there was all kinds of suffering for God's people. And yet, praise the Lord, all nations, extol him, all peoples.

What's going through Jesus' mind as he sings those words? Not despair, not hopelessness, but something very, very different.

[14 : 15] 500 years before, in Jerusalem, there was another Passover meal. And this was possibly, we don't know, but this was possibly the time that this Psalm 117 was written.

Then, to God's people, humanly speaking, had lots of reasons for despair. 70 years before that, Solomon's wonderful temple had been destroyed.

And another mass of God's people had been taken off in exile. God's people were devastated, absolutely devastated. And yet, some had returned to Jerusalem, and they'd rebuilt a temple, not like Solomon's temple, but a temple nonetheless.

Listen to what it meant for them as the foundation stones were laid. This is Ezra 3, 10 to 13.

If you want to look it up, it's, I checked, it's page 474 in the Pew Bibles. This is what it meant to them as the foundation stones of the temple were laid.

[15 : 25] when the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the Lord. The priests in their vestments came forward with trumpets, and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with symbols to praise the Lord according to the directions of the king, of David, king of Israel.

And they sang responsibly, praising and giving thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever toward Israel.

And all the people shouted with a great shout when they praised the Lord, because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid. But many of the priests and Levites and heads of Father's houses, old men who had seen the first house, wept with a loud voice when they saw the foundation of this house being laid, though many shouted also, shouted aloud for joy, so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people's weeping, for the people shouted with a great shout and the sound was heard far away.

And some time later, the people of God struggling with despair and hope, they celebrated the Passover together for the first time in some generations.

And so, what would have gone through their minds as they sang Psalm 117, praise the Lord, all nations, extol him, all peoples.

[16 : 53] How could this small, beleaguered, vulnerable community, how could they say anything to the powerful nations around them? How can we say to our world, praise the Lord, all nations, extol him, all peoples, when we see the mess in our world?

Well, for them, in Ezra's time, they knew what God had promised. They knew the promises to Abraham.

God had said to the father of their people many, many centuries before, all nations on earth will be blessed through you, through your offspring. A blessing to all nations was coming.

And King David himself, God had promised through King David. David had prayed, all the nations you have made shall come and worship before you, O Lord, and shall glorify your name.

And so they sang with faith and with hope, even amongst the pain and despair, praise the Lord, all nations, extol him, all peoples.

[18 : 02] They didn't know how God was going to bring this about, but they trusted that he's faithful to his promises and to his people. There's one more, one more place I want to point us to as we think just on this first point.

If you turn to Romans 15, that's page 1141 in the Pew Bibles. Again, I checked. In Romans 15, Paul says, Paul says, that Christ became a servant to the circumcised, that's the Jews, to show God's truthfulness in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, to people like King David, Abraham and King David, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy.

And then look down at verse 11. Paul quotes Psalm 117, verse 1 as evidence. God has called all nations to worship him and no one can thwart God's plans.

It's not a forlorn hope. It is what God is going to do. The people in Ezra's time could trust wholeheartedly that God would fulfill his purposes and his promise.

And we today can trust wholeheartedly that God will fulfill his purposes and his promise. And so when Paul says we don't need to despair in the face of a world that rejects God and does so much evil, verse 13 I love, may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

[19 : 56] So what was it that was going through Jesus' mind as he sung this call to the nations and to all peoples to praise the true and living God? He is there having laid out the bread and the wine representing his body and his blood knowing that he's about to go to the cross and they sing these words together and he sings them as the maker of the universe with flesh on.

The eternal Son of the Father made flesh come to dwell among sinful people to dwell among his creatures and so he looks at the Romans and he looks at the Jews and the Greeks and everyone else and he says to them this is why you were made this is what you need to praise the Lord to worship him with all that you are.

All nations were made to worship the true and living God all peoples every person everyone only finds their purpose in him in the worship of the creator.

and so Paul said later to the Corinthian church from now on we do not consider anyone from a worldly point of view and so when we look at our world and all the turmoil now let's not look at people from a worldly point of view the politics of the left or the right or the wars and rumours of wars we don't look at these things as the world does we don't look at our non-Christian neighbours or friends or family as the secular world would have us they too are creatures made in the image of God made to worship God who find who will only find their life and their purpose in the worship of the true and living God God is working out his plans in this tumultuous world and we can abound in hope as we trust in him because one day all peoples will worship him and praise his name so no matter what is going on in the world around you let yourself let your heart your whole life be taken up in

God's great plan for his world so verse one is a call to the world to worship the true and living God and verse two gives us the reason why so of course the bible gives us lots of reasons why human beings should worship God because he's worthy because he's holy because God desires that we worship him but possibly what we're given here is the very heart of why we should worship God so verse two for great is his steadfast love towards us and the faithfulness of the Lord endures forever so in Hebrew poetry there's often parallel ideas and sometimes that's to highlight a contrast but here it's to drive home the single point that the greatness of God's love is for all of those who turn to him so the word behind steadfast love or unfailing love or in the

[23 : 29] NIV it just says love the word that's translated from the Hebrew is chesed sometimes it's translated as like some translators made up a new word in English loving kindness it's not a word but that represents a bit better what chesed means or sometimes it's mercy or goodness but really it's all of these and so much more so chesed is a word it's used again and again in the Bible and it refers to God's unfailing love for his people his intense divine love love so great that only the best human love is merely an echo verse 2 says that it's great great is his love for his great is his steadfast love towards us and again that's the Hebrew word gabar and elsewhere that's used for an army prevailing in battle it's not like it's great like we say great this is like an army prevailing in battle or it's also used in Genesis for the floodwaters prevailing over the earth this is not a small thing the greatness of

God's love is an unimaginably powerful thing chesed is God's mercy towards his people that he doesn't hold their failings there are many failings in their sin against them that he will forgive them completely only if they will turn back to him it's a love that arises out of God's faithfulness to his promise his covenant to his people that they will be that you will be my people and I will never let you go it's like the love of a perfect husband who yearns for his wife and is jealous is rightly jealous if she's wayward and the people of Israel were wayward again and again weren't they and they faced the consequences of their sin and yet God would not let his people go that is God's chesed and it's not sentimental it demands a response whole hearted trusting in it forever type of response so chesed

God's loving kindness is God's powerful steadfast love for his people the nearest New Testament equivalent is the word grace and when Jesus sang this psalm after laying out the bread and the wine and saying to his disciples my body and my blood given for you surely God's chesed would have been filled with new meaning or in fact with the fulfillment this is the fulfillment of the meaning of everything said in the Old Testament about God's chesed it's the fulfillment of the Passover of the temple of the sacrifices of all God's promises because the absolute core of the message of the Christian faith is that God's chesed has been demonstrated in history elsewhere in Romans the Apostle Paul says God demonstrates his own love for us in this while we were still sinners

Christ died for us so imagine the thoughts that went through Jesus mind as these words passed through his lips after the bread and the wine knowing that the cross was before him agony was before him and yet he knew that by the single act he was providing salvation he was securing salvation and forgiveness for the whole world and the very fulfillment of the words that he sung the once and for all total and complete demonstration of God's great love and faithfulness and it's God's steadfast love towards us it's towards us this is for you Jesus warned that it's quite possible to worship God with our lips but our hearts are far from him the commentator

Christopher Ash says the phrase here towards us might be better translated over us for the covenant love of God covers and protects us after it has first overcome us life can be desperately hard can't it we look at a messed up world and we think well what do we do about that but our own lives can be desperately hard just this morning my wife had a phone call from one of our very close friends who lost both her grandparents in the space of the last four weeks and this friend said this morning that all she said is that her mother died suddenly last night we don't know how but we're very concerned life can be desperately desperately hard the circumstances that we face in our lives can make us miserable it can be absolutely miserable we know this the Jews of Jesus day knew that the exiles of Ezra's day knew that but something changes decisively in a person when we get that God's love this great chesed is not just a concept it's towards us it's not just something that other people need to know that the nations need to know it's not just a set of ideas or beliefs or a philosophy this is the truth of the universe and it's a truth that we must also experience to experience the love and faithfulness of the true and living

[29 : 40] God so this is Christopher Ash again this love and faithfulness is for me today we have an inbuilt tendency to pass it along to someone else saying this is for you when we first need to say this is for me or we say perhaps this will be for me but not yet for I am busy or preoccupied whether you're male or female young or old rich or poor highly or poorly educated whatever your ethnicity this call and invitation is for you today I remember years ago when I was a student I set myself a challenge to spend an hour in prayer and I thought I was being very impressive so this isn't if I do this I'll feel very pleased with myself and I found this sheet of paper this instructions online that gave 12 steps five minute focuses for my hour long prayer and the first in the list was to worship God as creator the second finished with the line

I can't remember what it was it was about the second finished with the line take time to be silent and let God love you and it hit me then for the first time I'd been a Christian for a decade by that point but for the first time I realised that I actually needed to let God love me to receive God's love into my life and it was like water for my soul this is how we become the sorts of people who don't just worship God with our lips but actually praise him and extol him from the heart John says the apostle John says in his first letter we love because he first loved us when we realise that God's steadfast love is not just words it's not just a fact it's not just a concept it's for you it's towards us it's for me it's for you it's for now despite all our sin when we get that when we get that again today it changes everything doesn't it changes the pain it changes how we see the chaos out there and we cannot but worship the God who loves us with such incredible mercy and grace so no matter what is going on in the world around you let yourself let your heart let your whole life be taken up in

God's great plans for his world lastly and briefly we're told that the faithfulness of the Lord endures forever it endures forever and that's not it's not exaggeration it's not hyperbole he means it forever really is in view in the scope of understanding of God's purposes in this psalm it's the same future that the apostle John wrote of when he saw in his vision of heaven in the book of revelation he hears there the song of heaven by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation there they are again this promise that people from all nations will praise and worship the true and living God so the ultimate fulfillment of this psalm is cosmic this little two verse psalm this fulfillment is cosmic one day people from all nations and tribes will praise the Lord and worship him with their whole hearts but there's a sense in which if we're going to sing this psalm a call to the nations to worship the true and living

God we better be doing something about it that's why in the first few centuries of the church often when the great commission was spoken about Jesus call to his disciples to go and take the gospel to the nations to make disciples of all nations this little psalm 117 was often associated with the great commission F.B.

Meyer says are we doing all we can to kindle the nations to praise they cannot praise him whom they do not know it is mere hypocrisy to bid them praise him if we have never sought to spread by lip or gift the mercy and truth revealed in Jesus our Lord it's easy to say the right things isn't it it's easy to attend church to be good Christian people in our actions even in our public prayers but it's quite another thing to be receiving the steadfast love of the Lord towards us and really genuinely desiring to share that with others and then doing it we had someone come to visit us at the college recently to inquire about studying at the college he's a Nigerian chap his wife is working here in the NHS and he's working elsewhere but his heart is for mission and he was telling us that he was walking around the streets of

[35 : 09] Stirling where he lives and his heart was breaking for the people who didn't know the Lord and so he decided right I need to find out what I can do in this strange cold country of Scotland so he told us he went to the police and he said what will I get arrested for if I do street evangelism and they said well they just didn't know what to say to the man and they said go to the council and ask them so he went to the council they also didn't know what to say and he said I'm here because I want to learn how to do a mission in this country because it is so different from Nigeria and we just loved his passion for the lost his passion to share the good news of Jesus do you know there was a time in Scotland in the early 19th century when people bought one-way tickets to the mission field and they packed their belongings in coffins seriously they weren't expecting to come back they were known as one-way missionaries there was a man

A.W. Milne he set out for the New Hebrides in the South Pacific he was aware that the people there had murdered every single missionary that had gone previously but still he went he said I have already died to myself and he lived for 35 years with the tribe when he died they buried him in the middle of the village and inscribed on his tombstone was this or something like this when he came there was no light when he left there was no darkness what about us it's been great to hear about the missionary work in Argentina that your church supports and prays for whenever that have going to morning I saw lots of friends from Scripture Union and some of you have come back from SU camps, some of you have come back from SU holiday clubs. Such an incredible opportunity to share the good news. They need cooks every summer. They're looking for cooks every summer. They're looking for volunteers for their camps and it's an opportunity to share the good news of Jesus with children who are often hungry to hear. I met somebody recently who told me she didn't want to get involved in mission activities with the church and she didn't want her church to be doing that because what they were focused on was friendship evangelism. Well you know that's great. That's great to be where God has placed you in sharing your faith. She said she was really enjoying her early retirement because that meant she had more time to spend with her non-Christian friends that she'd met at university and they were being a witness to them. And I said, and how many of them have come to faith? She said, none. It's 40 years. 40 years and none of them have come to faith?

Are we really just looking for excuses when there is a mission field out there? There is a world in our city, in our nation and beyond that needs to hear the great good news of Jesus. We don't need to wait 10 years before we tell our friends and family that Christ died for them and rose again so that they could have eternal life. We need to get on with this and proclaim this great good news of the gospel. We might feel it's a burden but it's not because what God wants is worshipers who worship him in spirit and truth, who have received his chesed for themselves, his loving kindness, who have seen just how absolute and complete that love is, displayed for them on the cross in the blood of his son, who are so captivated by his love that we cannot but share it. And so we cry out to God, fill us with your love, do your work in us so that we might be heralds of this great good news of the gospel, wherever it is you've placed us, whether it's with our friends of 40 years or our husbands or wives or whether it's to the ends of the earth. The antidote to the chaos out there in our world that can too often get into our own hearts is that we let ourselves, let our hearts, let our whole lives be taken up with God's great plans for his world. One day people from every tribe and tongue and nation will gather around his throne and worship him. That's where this world is going. That's why Jesus ultimately came. Let's give ourselves to receiving that work in us and to sharing that work with his world. Let's pray.

Father, we thank you that your mercy is towards us. Father, we thank you that you see us and you know us, each one of us here. You know our name, you know us better than we know ourselves.

And your desire for us is that we would be filled with all the fullness of God and that we would walk in the paths that you have prepared for us. And so God, would you help us today?

[41 : 11] Would you help us to be part of the fulfillment of the promise of this psalm, that we would worship you with our whole hearts and that we would be your mouthpieces to share this great good news with the lost world. And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.