

BETWEEN THE DREAMING AND THE COMING TRUE

The Long Game

Between the dreaming and the coming true. So, how are you doing? How are you doing as you seek to live a life worthy of the gospel of Christ? How are you doing as you seek to live a life worthy of the gospel of Christ in the mess? How are you doing as you seek to live a life worthy of the gospel of Christ in what seems a world with an increasingly uncertain future?

How are you doing at simply following Christ? Between the dreaming and the coming true. How are you doing?

I had a conversation only this week with someone who said to me – it seems as if, in the last few months, the world has gone mad! Maybe you identify with that comment, because, it may seem to you that the world has gone mad! We seem to be moving from one crisis to another: COVID; the war in Ukraine; fuel prices rising; basic living costs rising; train strikes; the threat of other public service strikes; hospital waiting lists as long as they've ever been; not enough GP's, dentists or plumbers; those suffering mental health challenges increasing; airlines unable to meet demand; queues everywhere!

Between the dreaming and the coming true. How are you doing?

One of the things I think I've realised as I've lived my Christian life is that it is a long game. We often like to talk about the start of our Christian life especially if it was dramatic! We love to hear dramatic testimony of conversion and coming to Christ. There's nothing wrong with that – it's great – it demonstrates how God meets people in all sorts of places and ways, but maybe we would do well too, to think about how we're going to end our Christian life.

I think that's what the book of Ecclesiastes wants to encourage us to do. I think one of the things Ecclesiastes does, is to suggest to us that a good way to live is to think about how we want to finish, and live in the light of that. I think a great title for the book of Ecclesiastes would be: 'With the end in mind!' That perspective of living helps us, I think, to live well over the long haul.

How many of you have heard of Billy Graham? How about Bron Chifford, or Chuck Templeton? In 1945 all three men were in their 20's and packing in the

crowds as they preached the Gospel. Templeton was described by one seminary president as the most gifted and talented young preacher in America at the time. Chifford was believed by others to be the most gifted and powerful preacher the church had seen in centuries. These young men had remarkable ministries.

So how come Billy Graham is the only name we know? By 1950 Chuck Templeton had left ministry to pursue a career in radio and TV and as a newspaper columnist. He had decided he was no longer a believer in Christ in the orthodox sense of the term. He no longer believed the validity of the claims of Jesus.

By 1954 Bron Chifford had lost his family, his ministry, his health and his life. Alcohol and financial mismanagement had been his undoing. He left his wife and his two Downs Syndrome children. At 35 he died of Cirrhosis of the liver in a run-down motel on the edge of Amarillo. He was buried in a cemetery for the poor because some ministers clubbed together to give him a proper resting place.

Billy Graham died in 2018 at the age of 99 having recorded his last sermon at the age of 95. In 1945 three young men were blessed with immense gifts and huge promise. Within 10 years only one was still following Jesus.

Between the dreaming and the coming true. How are you doing?

Psalm 132, a Psalm sung by God's people as they came together in Jerusalem. It might have something to say to us as we seek to live well over the long haul. Psalm 132 is one of the oldest Psalms, and the longest of the Psalms of Ascent. Essentially it does two things, two things that help us as we seek to live well between the dreaming and the coming true over the long haul. Firstly, it encourages us to be rooted in the past, and secondly, it invites us to live in the light of the future.

Psalm 132

A song of ascents.

¹ LORD, remember David
and all his self-denial.

² He swore an oath to the LORD,
he made a vow to the Mighty One of Jacob:

³ "I will not enter my house

or go to my bed,
⁴ I will allow no sleep to my eyes
or slumber to my eyelids,
⁵ till I find a place for the LORD,
a dwelling for the Mighty One of Jacob.”
⁶ We heard it in Ephrathah,
we came upon it in the fields of Jaar:
⁷ “Let us go to his dwelling place,
let us worship at his footstool, saying,
⁸ ‘Arise, LORD, and come to your resting place,
you and the ark of your might.
⁹ May your priests be clothed with your righteousness;
may your faithful people sing for joy.’”
¹⁰ For the sake of your servant David,
do not reject your anointed one.
¹¹ The LORD swore an oath to David,
a sure oath he will not revoke:
“One of your own descendants
I will place on your throne.
¹² If your sons keep my covenant
and the statutes I teach them,
then their sons will sit
on your throne for ever and ever.”
¹³ For the LORD has chosen Zion,
he has desired it for his dwelling, saying,
¹⁴ “This is my resting place for ever and ever;
here I will sit enthroned, for I have desired it.
¹⁵ I will bless her with abundant provisions;
her poor I will satisfy with food.
¹⁶ I will clothe her priests with salvation,
and her faithful people will ever sing for joy.
¹⁷ “Here I will make a horn grow for David
and set up a lamp for my anointed one.
¹⁸ I will clothe his enemies with shame,
but his head will be adorned with a radiant crown.

The first half of Psalm 132 (v1-10) encourages us and invites us to be rooted in the past. Another way of saying that might be to say it encourages us to be grounded in the truth of what we know and have experienced. The Psalm

takes one event from the past and remembers it. This event it remembers is the history of the Ark of the Covenant.

- ⁶We heard it in Ephrathah,
we came upon it in the fields of Jaar:
⁷“Let us go to his dwelling place,
let us worship at his footstool, saying,
⁸‘Arise, LORD, and come to your resting place,
you and the ark of your might.
⁹May your priests be clothed with your righteousness;
may your faithful people sing for joy.’”

The Ark of the Covenant was the tangible symbol of God’s presence with his people. It was a box that measured 3.3/4 by 2.1/4 by 2.1/4 feet. It contained the two tablets on which were written the ‘Ten Commandments,’ a jar of Manna, and Aaron’s rod. Its lid was solid gold and was called the Mercy Seat. The Ark was made by Moses and had been with the people since Sinai, through the wilderness wanderings into the Promised Land. The Philistines had captured the Ark and displayed it as a war trophy - until it became a problem to them! You can read that story in 1Samuel chapters 4 -7.

In 1Samuel chapter 7 verses 1-2, we read that the Ark was returned to Israel to a village called Kiriath-Jearim, and that’s where it stayed until David decided it should have a place of honour in Jerusalem. It later became enshrined in Solomon’s temple. The Ark, for Israel, was the story of God’s presence with his people. The Ark told the truth that God was a presence with his people, and over his people. The Ark told the story that it could not be abused, misused or manipulated by the people. But the Ark was a symbol – God was not in the box, but the box served to remind the people that God was both with them and over them.

Psalms 132 doesn’t tell the whole story of the Ark – it didn’t need to. Everyone reading it knew the story and the importance of the Ark. The Psalm simply remembers David’s promise to God that he would find a home for the Ark – and his obedience in fulfilling his promise. You can read of David bringing the Ark to Jerusalem in 2Samuel chapter 6. As the people sang the Psalm, they knew they were joining with others who shared their history.

They would be reminded of God’s presence with those who had gone before them and how he had helped them. They would have remembered God’s

actions for and among his people. They would have been reminded of God's presence with them in the past, and now as they gather, again with all the people.

Friends, remembering is so important, that's why today, it's been so good to hear Liz's testimony – remembering God's presence in her life. When we're in it for the long haul, remembering is a powerful dynamic that holds us and keeps us.

I am in ministry for a number of reasons, people said to me when I started out that, ministry is hard, especially if you're in it for the long haul. Turns out they were right! I've been doing this ministry for over 25 years now, and many times along the way, I've wondered about quitting. One of the most powerful things that holds me in ministry is those moments of remembering.

I went to Nefyn Mission because I couldn't say no to Chris Skilton. I didn't want to go, but I didn't want to let him down. After a few years on the team, I was asked to become the leader. I didn't want that either – I thought I was done with Nefyn, but I had to decide. So, I asked a friend to pray with me about it, should I say yes to becoming the leader of Nefyn Mission.

Ian Warner came to our house in Treyford Close, Ifield to help me pray. It turned out he had no idea where Nefyn was, absolutely no idea – apart from the fact it was in Wales somewhere. As we prayed he asked if I had a map, so I got the road map out of the car. He asked me to show him where Nefyn was on the map.

When I showed him where Nefyn was on the map, he then declared that he thought God was calling me to say yes to Nefyn! When I showed him the map, he saw that Nefyn was just across the water from Anglesey – and while we were praying he kept seeing Anglesey in his mind! In those moments it was as though God spoke clearly to me about Nefyn. Because I said yes to Nefyn, I am in ministry today. There were lots of other moments, processes, meetings and decisions, but it began in Nefyn.

When I struggle with ministry, when I struggle with feeling like I want to pack it all in and walk off into the sunset, when I feel it's all too much, when I would rather choose an easier life, it's good for me to remember Nefyn and that evening in Treyford Close.

Over the years I've developed my own box, in which I've put some things to help me to remember. One is a picture of a golfer trying to hit his ball out of a lake while its raining. All around the edge are the words: He loves you because he loves you....

Friends, the truth of God's presence in the past helps us stay for the long haul.. but Psalm 132 also invites us to live in the light of the future. Psalm 132 invites us to a daring leap into the future. It invites us to live in the light of God's promises to his people. The Bible never encourages us to live in the past. It is always inviting us to remember the past, remember what God has done, but to walk into God's future. To live well over the long haul we must hold onto the past with all our heart, but look to the future in anticipation of all God is.

Psalm 132 recognises that David and God have a history together and reminds us they have a future together.

¹⁵ I will bless her with abundant provisions;
her poor I will satisfy with food.

¹⁶ I will clothe her priests with salvation,
and her faithful people will ever sing for joy.

¹⁷ "Here I will make a horn grow for David
and set up a lamp for my anointed one.

¹⁸ I will clothe his enemies with shame,
but his head will be adorned with a radiant crown.

The abundant provisions of the wilderness years are now a future promise. The people of Israel sing their Psalms as they go to Jerusalem and we still sing our songs of worship and praise and we will continue to do that. God's presence is sometimes symbolised by light – here a lamp for David. We know that the light shines in the darkness and the darkness cannot put it out. God will clothe his enemies in shame and he will ultimately triumph.

The truth about the story of God is that love wins. We hold onto the deep and powerful truth that one day, one fine day, evil will be defeated and the kingdom of the heavens will fill the earth. One day, one fine day, God will be all in all. I don't know about you, but I need that hope to fill my life. I need to grasp that hope and to hold onto it with all my heart. To be in it for the long haul, we need to remember the past and have hope for the future.

For some reason, as I was writing this talk, I found myself thinking about geese, but as I reflected on it, I'm wondering if geese might have something to say to us about the truth of Psalm 132. You will have noticed that geese fly, over long distances, in a familiar 'V' formation. They always do, they always remember to fly in a 'V'. Remarkably geese can fly 71% further if they fly in a 'V' formation than if they were to fly solo. And remarkably even the youngest and weakest geese can go the distance when they fly together in a 'V'.

Some geese can be heard honking as they fly. These are the ones at the back and they honk to encourage the ones at the front for whom the flying is more difficult. They honk to encourage the point goose (the one at the front) to stay on track and not give up. Geese, when flying, keep changing the point goose because it's hard, out front. Truth is, all the able geese do their bit to make it over the long haul.

The people of Israel went to Jerusalem together and sang their Psalms together, they remembered together, they hoped together. Perhaps the geese teach us that, like the people of Israel, we will do better over the long haul when we do it together. Perhaps this Psalm encourages us to fly further, together. Turns out geese can fly a lot further when they fly together.

Friends, the world is a challenging place right now, perhaps the wisdom of the geese is found in Psalm 132. Perhaps Psalm 132 not only invites and encourages us to remember God in the past.... Perhaps Psalm 132 not only invites and encourages us to hope in God's future.... But perhaps Psalm 132 also invites and encourages us to reflect on being the people of God together; remember together, hoping together.

Perhaps Psalm 132 reminds us that we are not made to walk this journey of faith on our own. Between the dreaming and the coming true. So... how are you doing?

Amen

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