

BETWEEN THE DREAMING AND THE COMING TRUE

Enjoy God

How are you doing friends?

How are you doing at living between the dreaming and the coming true?

I hope that our journey through the Psalms of Ascent has been helpful. The Psalms of Ascent, sung by the people of God on their way to worship in Jerusalem, reflect their journey of faith. The Psalms of Ascent, have been a reminder of how we might live between the dreaming and the coming true.

We know that life is full of challenges. We know that the journey of faith can be tough, really tough. We know that life does not always go as we'd hoped, planned or expected. We know that life sometimes brings twists and turns that take us in directions we do not want or desire. Reading the Psalms of Ascent reminds us that others have discovered the same things we have. Reading the Psalms of Ascent reminds us that help is available from those who have gone before.

We have, in our journey through the Psalms of Ascent, reflected on some truths that help us live well between the dreaming and the coming true: the deep and profound truth that God guards us and protects us from evil. The deep and profound truth that God is watching and waiting, always...that his story is the bigger and better story and that we can choose to live in that story.

The deep and profound truth that as people of faith we sit in a fortress: there is no safer place to be, than in God. The deep and profound truth that, in all we do, God desperately want us to participate with him...to join with God in what he is already doing. That we were made to do life together with God.

The deep and profound truth that to persevere when faith is tough and life is hard, is to follow in the footsteps of the Master. It is to join in with others who have gone before us. It is to choose to hold before us the truth of God's bigger and far better story.

The deep and profound truth that when we find ourselves in the depths, when the bottom has fallen out of our world, God's love reaches to us, surrounds us, embraces us and holds us.

The deep and profound truth that because God is always watching and waiting, we can know that he always does what he promised: that God is the faithful God. The deep and profound truth that to remember what God has done in our own lives, and in the community of the people of God, can hold us in the tough times: that to remember our own testimony of our journey with God speaks to our hearts. The deep and profound truth that we can look forward in hope because God isn't finished yet, the story is not yet complete: that one day, one fine day, God will be all in all and the kingdom of the heavens will fill the earth.

So, how are you doing between the dreaming and the coming true?

Sometime around 1994, I can't remember exactly when it was, I applied to train for Baptist Ministry, in those days it was a three-part process. First, you had to have the support of the church. Second, you had to have the support of the Ministerial Recognition Committee. And thirdly, you had to have the support of the college in which you hoped to train - for me it was Spurgeon's college.

The church backed me unanimously. The Ministerial Recognition Committee turned me down. I never got to go to Spurgeon's College. I was devastated. To this day I don't quite understand the reasons they gave. Something about not being enough of a Baptist! They also said something about me deciding too quickly that I wanted to pursue Baptist Ministry. Anyone who knew me then, and anyone who knows me now, knows that I don't make big decisions quickly!

Never-the-less, the Ministerial Recognition Committee said 'No.' I didn't know what to do, or how to understand what they said. I think it is true to say, the church was surprised, and Steve Hembury, who was the Minister here at the time, certainly was. To me, it felt like the end of the road. I'd been on a journey that, after much thought, reflection, conversation, encouragement, prayer and wrestling, had led me to pursue ministry. And then it felt like people who didn't know me at all, told me, and those who supported and encouraged me, I was wrong.

In those moments I decided I would never preach again, or lead worship, or be part of leadership in church. I concluded I was done! A visiting speaker who I didn't know and I can't remember his name, came and said to me, in front of the congregation, that he thought the 'No!' was a comma and not a full stop.

Someone in the church gave me a card. The card had flowers on the front. Flowers! Inside the card they wrote these words: "Take time to smell the flowers!" The card and words irritated me! Take time to smell the flowers – what does that even mean? Actually, they contained a deep truth. It is a deep truth that I came to recognise but am still learning. It is a deep truth that I find challenging still now, all these years on.

It is a deep truth that I think we would all do well to understand and grasp. It is a deep and profound truth that it is possible and good to enjoy God, whatever is happening and in whatever circumstances I find myself.

Psalm 134

A song of ascents.

¹ Praise the LORD, all you servants of the LORD
who minister by night in the house of the LORD.

² Lift up your hands in the sanctuary
and praise the LORD.

³ May the LORD bless you from Zion,
he who is the Maker of heaven and earth

The word bless, or praise, depending on the translation, appears three times in the Psalm. Psalm 134 is a Psalm of praise. As you know Psalm 134 is the last in the Psalms of Ascent. The first Psalm in the Psalm of Ascent is Psalm 120. Psalm 120 is about the choice to turn toward God. It is a Psalm encouraging us to make a choice for God. Another word for making a choice for God is repentance.

The Christian journey begins with a choice for God, it begins with an act of repentance. As we go along our journey of faith, with all its challenges, as we learn of God and experience him in our lives, it becomes a life of praise. Psalm 134 teaches the deep and profound truth that life with God, lived in his presence, is a life of praise, it is a life of blessing.

There are two words that are translated 'blessed' in the Bible. One has the sense of having it all together, of well-being, coming from living in tune with creation and redemption. This is always applied to and about people, never about God. The other word for 'blessing' is about what God does to us, with us and for us – it is when God enters into a covenant with us. It is when God comes to us and we live in that truth.

The Christian journey begins with repentance – choosing to turn to God, and then he comes to us and shares himself with us, graciously and generously. God comes to us and stays with us, through the good times and the hard times, when it is easy and when it is tough. God comes to us with grace and peace. God blesses us.

When we know God's blessing, when we recognise his presence with us – whatever the circumstances – we respond to what God brings to us, and our response is to bless God – to praise God. Friends, when we learn to recognise and see God's blessing even in the toughest times, his presence, his coming to us, his peace, his love – then we become good at praising him in all the circumstance of life.

Psalms 134 issues an invitation to the people of God. Verse 1 invites us to come and praise the Lord! To be honest, we don't always want to do that, do we? At least, I don't! When life is tough, when decisions go against us, when life takes a turn I'm not ready for, I don't always want to "Praise the Lord!"

The people of God have made it to Jerusalem. The journey may have been hard and difficult, long and tiring, but now they've arrived the invitation is to come and praise God, however they come and however they feel.

Psalms 134 also issues a command: "Praise God! Now you've arrived in Jerusalem – Praise God! After all that's why you're here!"

I think the deep and profound truth of Psalms 134 is simply this: take time to smell the flowers. Here's what I learnt from that irritating card in one of the more challenging times in my life. Life's twists and turns are not the end of the story. They are not the end of my story and they are not the end of God's story, or my story with God.

In that time, between the dreaming and the coming true, God was divinely present even when I couldn't see it. I could have quit, like I said I would. I could have sulked and walked away (and I did sulk). I did not want to smell the flowers. I did not want to see the beauty in challenge; possibility in disappointment; grace in struggling; joy in frustration.

Taking time to smell the flowers was an invitation to me to understand it wasn't all about me...that my story is never just about me, that my story is part of God's bigger and better story.

Taking time to smell the flowers was an invitation to me to grow in faith and maturity, to learn about myself and about God. Taking time to smell the flowers was an invitation to me to see and recognise that God's presence was still as close as the air I breathe. Taking time to smell the flowers was an

invitation to me to understand and embrace the truth that God was still for me and still wanted the very best for me.

Taking time to smell the flowers was an invitation to me to discover that everything I knew about God was, in fact, still wonderfully and deeply true. Taking time to smell the flowers was an invitation to me, in the tough times, to remember again who God was, is and always will be. Taking time to smell the flowers was an invitation to me, in the circumstances I found myself in, to lift my hands in praise.

Taking time to smell the flowers was an invitation to me to live the truth of Psalm 134. The invitation to take time and smell the flowers, to live the truth of Psalm 134, in the invitation God extends to you, today, in these moments. It is the invitation Psalm 134 extends to you as you walk your journey of faith in all of life's circumstances.

Friends, I hope we can choose to live in the truth of this Psalm and that we can, in all circumstances, enjoy God!

All those months ago, I began this series with a story I've used before and will probably use again. It does, I think, capture the truth contained in the Psalms of Ascent, and especially the truth of Psalm 134.

So, without apology, I'm going to read it again now. Maybe, as I read it, you can apply it to your own circumstances today and see what God says to you.

PEARLS

The cheerful girl with bouncy golden curls was almost five. With her mother at the checkout stand, she saw them: a circle of glistening white pearls in a pink foil box. "Oh please, Mummy. Can I have them? Please, Mummy, please!"

Quickly the mother checked the back of the little foil box and then looked back into the pleading blue eyes of her little girl's upturned face. "A dollar ninety-five. That's almost \$ 2.00. If you really want them, I'll think of some extra chores for you and in no time you can save enough money to buy them for yourself. Your birthday's only a week away and you might get another crisp dollar bill from Grandma."

As soon as Jenny got home, she emptied her penny bank and counted out 17 pennies. After dinner, she did more than her share of chores and she went to the neighbour and asked Mrs Mc James if she could pick dandelions for ten cents. On her birthday, Grandma did give her another new dollar bill and at last she had enough money to buy the necklace.

Jenny loved her pearls. They made her feel dressed up and grown up. She wore them everywhere – Sunday school, kindergarten, even to bed. The only time she took them off was when she went swimming or had a bubble bath. Mother said if they got wet, they might turn her neck green.

Jenny had a very loving daddy and every night when she was ready for bed, he would stop whatever he was doing and come upstairs to read her a story. One night when he finished the story, he asked Jenny, “Do you love me?”

“Oh yes, Daddy. You know that I love you.”

“Then give me your pearls.”

“Oh Daddy, not my pearls. But you can have Princess – the white horse from my collection. The one with the pink tail. Remember, Daddy? The one you gave me. She’s my favourite.”

“That’s ok, honey, Daddy loves you. Good night.” And he brushed her cheek with a kiss.

About a week later, after story time, Jenny’s daddy asked again, “Do you love me?”

“Daddy, you know I love you.”

“Then give me your pearls.”

“Oh Daddy, not my pearls. But you can have my baby doll. The brand new one I got for my birthday. She is so beautiful and you can have the yellow blanket that matches her sleeper.”

“That’s okay. Sleep well. God bless you, little one. Daddy loves you.” And as always, he brushed her cheek with a gentle kiss.

A few nights later when her daddy came in, Jenny was sitting on her bed with her legs crossed Indian-style. As he came close, he noticed her chin was trembling and one silent tear rolled down her cheek. “What is it Jenny? What’s the matter?” Jenny didn’t say anything but lifted her little hand up to her daddy. And when she opened it, there was her little pearl necklace. With a little quiver, she finally said, “Here, Daddy. It’s for you.” With tears gathering in his own eyes, Jenny’s kind daddy reached out with one hand to take the dime store necklace, and with the other hand he reached into his pocket and pulled out a blue velvet case with a strand of genuine pearls and gave them to Jenny.

He had had them all the time. He was just waiting for her to give up the dime store stuff so he could give her genuine treasure.

So much like our heavenly Father.

So, friends, in the light of the truth of Psalm 134 and the truth about your heavenly Father, let me read these closing words from Psalm 134.

“May the Lord bless you from Zion, he who is the maker of heaven and earth.”

Amen!

Preached and Live Streamed from Crawley Baptist Church, on Sunday 17th July 2022,
by Rev. Ian Phillips.