

Perseverance & Simplicity

St Andrew's - 27th August 2023 - Isaiah 55:10-11, Matthew 6:25-34

Isaiah 55:10-11

“For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, 11 so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

Matthew 6:25-34

25 “Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? 26 Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? 27 And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? 28 And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, 29 yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. 30 But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? 31 Therefore do not be anxious, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ 32 For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. 33 But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.

34 “Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.

The Paradox

There's a bit of a paradox when it comes to Bible reading, regular prayer, quiet times. I think we'd all agree that we shouldn't be doing these things out of a sense of duty or obligation - we should do it because we enjoy it, because we want to know God better and talk to Him. And yet, what really seems to help, more than most things, is to make a rather mundane habit of it. To do it day in, day out, at the same time and place, to make a discipline out of it.

Ideally, we'd enjoy spending time with God and His word so much that we wouldn't have to persuade ourselves to do it every day. But for most of us, a lot of the time we don't enjoy it, unless we make the time for it and persist in it.

I could liken it to exercise - the hardest part of a run for instance, isn't the end, when you're tired out, but the beginning, before you even set off. You need to psyche yourself up to start, it seems so daunting despite having done it before, but then once you set off and get going, it's fine. Enjoyable even.

The first time you run anywhere after having not done it for a long time, it's hard. You're not used to it, it doesn't come naturally. But with practice, it becomes enjoyable. What was hard work, becomes leisure, but only with some persistence.

Persistence & Simplicity in relationship

We see this in Bible reading - who hasn't stalled at Leviticus the first time they attempt it? It's hard going. There are parts of scripture that can be daunting and confusing. It's unfamiliar, things might not make sense. But when you're reading through the tenth time, the hundredth time, you'll be spotting the links to elsewhere in scripture, finding the patterns and seeing the whole. It becomes interesting and enjoyable, because it's a discipline. We don't want to be legalistic, but on the other hand, treating it as a discipline, a habit, something we do with regularity, is what makes it less of a chore!

Quantity has a quality of its own

It's said sometimes that quantity has a quality all of its own. There's some truth to this. Quantity of time spent with God will I think lead to quality of time spent.

You don't get to know someone by only spending the most quality of time with them. If you spent all your time going to the best of shows, eating at the fanciest of restaurants, doing exciting things together, you won't get to know someone as fully as if you have boring moments and times of ordinary activity. The long car journey, the waiting around for something, the time spent doing the washing up or grocery shopping. The mundane is where we really find who someone is, and really reveal ourselves as well.

So too in our time with God. You won't get to know God well if you only ever talk to Him when it's exciting. If the only time you pay attention to scripture is when you hear a talented preacher at a conference somewhere, you're not going to get to know the author of scripture very well at all. The great thing is that God is as present in the mundane and the ordinary of our lives as He is in the extremes. If we don't recognise God in the everyday matters of life, it's no wonder we don't know Him as well as we should.

Quiet times of simplicity

So our quiet times needn't be fancy. Simple reading through the Bible, simple prayers, simple time spent in thought about what we've read, are all just fine.

Another way we can trip ourselves up, is the idea that we have to get something really great out of our time spent studying the Bible. We have to at least remember something, or have some insight, for it to be really worthwhile. But you probably can't remember what you ate last week, just like you probably can't remember what Bible passages you read last week. That's OK - it's nourishment, whether we realise it or not.

Persistence in prayer

Time with God is not all Bible reading though. There's another aspect of our time with God that requires persistence - prayer. We should absolutely spend time listening to God - reading His written word, and listening prayerfully. But we also speak ourselves - we bring ourselves to God. We should worship, adore, be grateful to God, confess our sins and of course ask God for things. We shouldn't be shy about it.

Paul gives us a good examples of his persistence in prayer by what he writes in his letters.

Paul writes to the Romans (Romans 1:8-10):

*8 First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed in all the world. 9 For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son, **that without ceasing I mention you 10 always in my prayers,** asking that somehow by God's will I may now at last succeed in coming to you.*

He writes to the Thessalonian church (2 Thessalonians 1:11-12):

*11 **To this end we always pray for you,** that our God may make you worthy of his calling and may fulfill every resolve for good and every work of faith by his power, 12 so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

He writes to Timothy (2 Timothy 1:3):

*3 I thank God whom I serve, as did my ancestors, with a clear conscience, as I **remember you constantly in my prayers night and day.***

Paul's attitude is one of persistence. These are people and places far away. But he prays 'without ceasing', 'always', 'constantly day and night'. Paul wouldn't have known what the situation in these far flung places was until long after the fact. But he still prays. He's not looking for immediate results, he prays constantly in faith, not knowing the outcome.

No need for immediacy

Our culture values the immediate, the instant. We get frustrated when things don't happen right now. We find it hard to wait, to be patient.

It doesn't help that we usually hear about people's best moments. We hear from other Christians about their answered prayers, their moments of deep insight, how some particular scripture was meaningful. But we typically don't hear about how much prayer was unanswered, how much reading felt boring. We can get the wrong impression and chase the high, rather than pursue the long business of relationship. We want to be that person that knows the Bible inside and out, but we don't want the hard work of reading it every day for years.

God's timing is not always immediate. God can of course do things immediately, as we saw in last weeks' reading - the woman touched the hem of Christ's garment and was healed then and there, no delay. But God often works in the long term, takes a longer view of things and works in ways we don't understand.

In the book (Be Still), Brian Heasley tells us about his time in Ibiza where he and those he worked with distributed Bibles to people they met. They gave out quite a lot of them, but never saw any real results of this.

Ten years later, whilst at a Christian conference he's talking to someone and they talk about what brought them there, why they are Christians. This person tells him he was given a Bible whilst in Ibiza and this led to his faith and recovery from addiction and eventually to be sat next to Brian at a conference. It took ten years to notice the impact of the small act of giving people Bibles, but sure enough, God worked through what was a very small and probably at the time very mundane act.

We have a desire for immediate results, but God often has a different plan.

Biblical examples

The Bible is full of examples of God working in the long term.

Abraham for example, waited decades for God to fulfil his promise to provide him a son and heir. God promised him something that felt impossible at his and Sarah's age, and even more impossible decades later when it came to pass.

Joseph was told by God in a dream that he would rule over his family, even as one of the youngest of his brothers. When he was sold into slavery, it seemed impossible, but God was working to make the situation where he would be exalted above his brothers - as he was sold to the rich Potiphar, imprisoned amongst the prisoners from Pharaoh's palace, given the ability to interpret the dreams of those prisoners and eventually the Pharaoh himself, and only then does his fortune turn around and he is made the most important man in Egypt, second only to the pharaoh. At every turn of the story, God was bringing him closer to the end result, but you can imagine that for Joseph, going through it all, it felt like the opposite, right up until it turned around completely.

Then in Exodus, we see that God's promise to Abraham that his children would occupy the promised land comes to pass - but not until a long time later, when they have grown to a large nation, gone through slavery in Egypt, and have to travel in the wilderness for 40 years. But what God promised, came to pass in time.

David was anointed king by Samuel when he was very young (1 Samuel 16). You'll remember that Samuel saw all David's older brothers, but it wasn't any of them that God had chosen, but David. It wasn't until around 15 years later, that he actually becomes king of Israel.

And of course all these events - each of these characters, moves us towards God's ultimate purpose. Abraham was promised that his descendants would number like the stars, this before he had a child of his own. In the new testament, we see that through our being born again into the line of the Messiah, Jesus Christ, we too are part of Abraham's line. Paul says this (Galatians 3:29):

And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.

Joseph was essential in bringing to pass the events of Israel's time in Egypt and the exodus. In him we see a type of Christ - one who was despised turned out to be the saviour. In the exodus, we see the salvation of God's people again, this time showing us different aspects of what Christ would do, in the Passover - the blood sacrifice required to save; in the passing through the red sea, a figurative baptism.

And without David, the archetypal king of Israel, how could we have the son of David, the true King, Christ Jesus, sitting on David's throne?

This is to barely scratch the surface of course - we could go through the whole of scripture and make these connections.

The bigger picture

Isaiah 55:10-11:

*“For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven
and do not return there but water the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
11 so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.*

Isaiah 55 gives us a look at the bigger picture with all this - what God has promised, what He has said will happen will happen. If God promises something, there's no way for that not to come to pass, in time. God's word will succeed - like a watered plant. It takes time, but from the tiniest of seeds comes forth the biggest of trees. God's word is for us like the rain, that comes down and makes a fertile land for the growing of crops, the fulfilment of God's purposes. We can trust God's word.

Faithfulness is part of God's character. He is the unchanging constant in a world of constant change. His promises are sure because of who He is. We can trust in His long term plan, because He is the sovereign over all space and time. We look to the word, because of the author of that word.

As we see from the biblical examples earlier, the actions of ordinary people were used by God for things much greater than themselves. The perseverance and patience of these people was used by God to accomplish great things, even to accomplish His ultimate purposes in Christ's life, death and resurrection.

Similarly, we can in our own lives, in our small simple actions, trust God to use what we do for His purposes. Our actions are all part of a bigger picture. When you make a habit of reading the Bible today, when you set about making your prayers more regular, you might be planting a small seed, a seemingly insignificant action. But the seed planted today, may grow into a great tree in time.

The benefits aren't necessarily just for ourselves either - our great-great grandchildren may sit in the shade of trees we plant by prayer today. Our knowledge of scripture will influence our actions and attitudes in ways that will influence generations after us. Our actions are part of a bigger picture. The small things we do really do matter.

Not to worry

But at the same time - if God has promised something, whether we do anything or not, we can trust it will come to pass. When scripture tells us in Romans 8:28

28 And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.

When we hear that, we can trust it - that even in our failures, God can work. He knows the whole story, he knows all things, His plan is to work all things for good - in the long run, all will be well for us.

Look at the passage we read from Matthew. Without going into too much detail, just look through the examples given about why we shouldn't be anxious. At the heart of Jesus' exposition about why not to worry, are these examples that illustrate God the Father's character. Jesus talks about how God provides for all the birds, how he clothes the plants, making things beautiful, even if they are short lived bits of nature. And so God knows exactly what we need and is faithful to provide what He promises.

In the end His purposes will prevail. We will all know Him as we ought, face to face, in a world restored, as people made new ourselves.

Practical matters

Finally, practical matters. Make a habit of spending time with God. It needn't be complicated, in fact it's better to keep it simple. Make it so simple you can't miss it. Make it routine.

You don't need to chase a special experience, the ordinary times with God are where much of the work is done.

If you're stuck wondering what to pray, maybe make a simple list of people or situations to pray for. Work through the list, even if you don't have more to say than 'Lord bless this person'.

Read your Bible. It's astounding how many Christians haven't read the whole Bible even once. It doesn't take any special skill to do, just a bit of persistence. When you reach a part you don't understand, that's fine. Keep reading. If you reach a genealogy, it might not be obvious how it's relevant, but keep reading. It's that simple.

To sum it up, spending time with God takes time.