

God's Presence Goes Before Us

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[0 : 00] This autumn, as a church, we're following a series looking at what it means to believe in the supernatural presence of God as a living reality.

And today we think particularly about what it means to think about the living presence of God as the God who goes before us. Not only is he with us in the present now, but he goes ahead of us.

One of the many things that I've been struck with once again over the last few days in the events of this last week is a basic truth, but something that is quite sobering.

That the death of Her Majesty the Queen reminds us that we are all mortal. That whoever we are, whatever we are in this life, whatever we do, whatever we become, however rich, however powerful we may be, death is the ultimate leveller.

However, we are all mortal. Now on the one hand, that could sound very bleak and morbid. Our Queen was Christian, and throughout her life she spoke very positively about faith.

[1 : 36] And the reason why what I've just said does not need to sound morbid at all, but in fact the very opposite, very hopeful, is because our faith in Christ that was our Queen's, is our Queen's.

Except now it is not faith, it is knowledge. It is that it's the conviction that Christ goes before every single one of us. That's what happens on the cross.

That whatever death is, God in Christ has gone ahead of us, goes ahead of us, and is there ahead of us waiting with open arms.

And it is that fundamental truth, that conviction, that enables us to stare the reality of human mortality in the face, with confidence and with hope.

And because we can do that, so it changes the way that we live our lives right now. So as we think about what it means to celebrate the living presence of God, who goes ahead of us and is ahead of us in our future, that is where we work it out from.

[2 : 46] God is there ultimately in eternity, but because we know that, we know he's ahead of us in everything that lies between now and then. So here's a question for you.

Have you ever found yourself in a situation where you've just been overwhelmed with a sense of worry or concern or fear or anxiety over the sense of the unknown?

Where you feel like you're stepping out into a situation and even though you may have this ultimate, eternal faith in the risen Jesus, nevertheless, it's trying to work that out in the midst of the unknown now.

Have you ever found yourself in that situation? In 1966, a young woman in her early 20s, she was from Croydon, got on board a boat with nothing other than a £10 note and a prayer that God would tell her where to get off this boat.

The boat incident was going all around the world. Eventually, after a long time, she felt that prayer was answered and she got off in Hong Kong.

[3 : 57] This woman then spent the next 50 plus years in one of the most dangerous places on earth, working alongside gangs of criminals, drug pushers, leading them to Christ and seeing lives transformed.

Her name was Jackie Pullinger. Now, that may not be your reality, but I'm sure every one of us can think of some situation in our lives when we face the future with that sense of, frankly, being scared, where we just do not know what lies in that immediate future.

And even if we're not talking about specific scenarios, there's a genuine sense in which that applies to all of our lives. We don't know what's going to happen to us tomorrow. We can look at tomorrow, this next week, and think with all kinds of questions, what's going to happen?

What's going to happen? The truth that we find repeated in Scripture over and over and over again is that God goes ahead of you and is ahead of you in that future.

So let's just turn to the story we had this morning. It's the story of Saul, a known persecutor of Christians, and it speaks directly into everything I've just described.

[5 : 16] We've got Saul, who is a known persecutor of Christians. This can seem quite removed from our experience because we don't know what it's, generally speaking, in this country, we don't know what it's like to live under persecution.

Lots of Christians worldwide do. Face prison and even death for their faith. But because it's not part of our reality, we tend not to think it is reality. But it is reality.

And that was the reality, as this story was being told, that Saul, who was known, known to be a persecutor of Christians who would systematically round up Christians, have them put in prison, and have them killed.

He has an experience of the vision, of a vision of the risen Jesus. He's blinded. And we find two, I would suggest, at least two situations in this story, which I heard this morning, where we're reminded of the presence of God that goes ahead of us as we step into the unknown.

So Ananias, also, who is a Christian believer, has this vision that he is to go and seek out this man called Saul, who is a known killer of Christians, and go and pray for him.

[6 : 29] I can't think that might have been quite a difficult call to swallow. And yet he steps out. And what might it have been like even for Saul, who, you know, Matt pleads to himself in his shoes that you've been systematically persecuting and killing Christians for quite a while, suddenly you lose your sight and you walk into the hands of those that you've been persecuting.

In both scenarios, we find two people stepping out into the unknown with that conviction that it is God who goes ahead of us. And as we look in Scripture, we find time and time again that God is in the habit of dealing with us in those kind of ways.

For example, Abraham was 75 years old when he was called to set out on a journey and was promised that God was going to prepare a land for him, but he didn't know where that was going to be.

75 years old. Moses was called to lead a whole people out of slavery in Egypt with absolutely no idea how that was going to happen or how it would unfold.

Joshua, Moses' successor, was called to lead God's people across the Jordan and into a promised land, a place that was full of unknowns and dangers and simply told, you've got to be strong and very courageous.

[7 : 57] Jonah was called to walk straight into a dangerous city renowned for its wickedness and stand and be a street preacher in that place. Ruth, when she lost everything and was stripped of all security, stepped out with Naomi, her mother-in-law, into an unknown future.

And of course, Jesus called fishermen to simply leave their boats, their nets, everything that represented their security and just go and follow him. And yet, throughout these experiences, time and time again of God calling people with the promise that you don't know the future that I do and I'm ahead of you waiting for you in that future, God's promises are consistent.

Deuteronomy 1.30 says, the Lord your God is going before you. Deuteronomy 31.8 says, the Lord himself goes before you and will be with you. He will never leave you nor forsake you.

Do not be afraid and do not be discouraged. Isaiah 45, verse 2 says, I will go before you. I will level the mountains. Isaiah 52, verse 12 says, the Lord will go before you.

Matthew 20, chapter 20, Jesus said, after I have been raised, I will go ahead of you. John chapter 14, verse 3, Jesus said, I will go and prepare a place for you in eternity.

[9 : 23] So what does this mean in practical terms then to talk about what it means as a Christian to believe and have that confidence that God goes ahead of you into that future that you don't yet know? I want to suggest in typical preacher fashion three things.

Three practical things. The first thing is that you can, with confidence, embrace the unknown knowing that God goes ahead of us because that is how we grow.

When we don't have that control over our future but we are called to trust and to trust alone in him.

That's how we grow and that's when we grow. There's a story told about a boy who was playing in a garden one day and he found a cocoon.

This cocoon was moving and he looked for a few minutes and saw that there was a moth trying to break out of this cocoon. The boy felt sorry for the moth so he went inside, got a pair of scissors and cut a little hole in this cocoon so that the moth could actually get out.

What the boy didn't realise was it was the worst thing he could do because what he didn't understand was that the moth actually had to press outwards and break its own way out and struggle out of that cocoon because it was nature's way of the fluids in the body of the moth being forced into the wings.

[10:35] Because the moth was denied that struggle that it needed to have, it tumbled out of the cocoon with no wings and it never flew. Now we've got to be careful with that sort of analogy.

I'm not suggesting for one moment that God deliberately sends suffering our way. I don't believe that. But I do believe that it is true that it is when we are in those situations of suffering and let's be honest all of us have them in different ways and at different times of our lives.

When we are in those situations that is when we grow. At least that is when we can grow when we allow our focus to be on God and not the struggles themselves.

So the first thing then is that when we know that God is ahead of us it means we can embrace struggles with that knowledge. The second thing is that we can be confident that God will never ask more of us than we can handle.

He won't. Toscanini was an Italian conductor. He lived from 1867 to 1957 and he was renowned for having a very hot temper.

[11:43] The musicians in his orchestras were terrified of him. One particular evening they were just getting ready to, it was minutes before a concert was going to start and a bassoon player and very nervously to this man and said I'm really sorry but I've just had an accident with my instrument and I can't get this instrument to play an E flat.

It's not going to work. I can't play tonight. He watched with horror as Toscanini just closed his eyes and said nothing and covered his ears for several very long minutes.

Apparently then Toscanini opened his eyes and said you don't need to worry you can play this evening. E flat doesn't come up in any of your scores. He played through the entire concert in his mind.

Such was his intricate knowledge of every single part that formed part of that orchestra for that entire evening. Multiply that by infinity and you have something of an image there as to the way God regards your future.

He knows it. Every single one of us. That's hard for us it's impossible for us to get our mortal minds around that but that's the truth of it. He knows what you can do and what you can't do and that brings me on to the third and the final point there.

[13:11] Is that actually when we're faced with it we'd be surprised actually what we can we can actually do and we can be taken by surprise. Time and time and time again I've found in ministry people say to me I didn't I had no idea how I got through that but I somehow did but I couldn't have done had it not been for my faith in Christ.

God has this mysterious way of giving us what we need just when we need it. When it's lying ahead we think to ourselves that's never going to happen I'm never going to be able to face that I don't know how it's going to happen I can't face it but when we get there God surprises us.

One final story. Corrie Ten Boom tells a story when she was a little girl she was worrying about something with her father and she was telling him how she was worried about the future and how something was going to unfold and he said look God will take care of it he's got it.

he said think of it like this when we get on board a train we travel together by a train what do you need to get on that train and she said to her dad well a ticket he said of course we do I get a ticket he said when do I give you that ticket do I give that ticket to you months or even or just weeks before we travel she said no he said when do I hand you that ticket he said dad you give it to me the second we get on the train God seems to be in the habit of meeting those needs right when we need them from our perspective we look at a future that we don't know and we wonder how on earth are we going to get through that but we can and we will because God is ahead of us just as he always has been just as he always will be and he always keeps his word let's pray for each and every one of us in this room right now this will be a slightly different answer but just to answer the question as to what is it that you see when you look into the future and think of the uncertainties as we think about what our futures look like and the things that perhaps concern us whether that's in the short term or the longer term let's just take a moment now to hold those uncertainties in prayer before God knowing that even though we do not know what's going to happen he does living God you go ahead of us thank you that you know the future that we don't forgive us for when we become distracted and we focus on the struggle and we lose our gaze upon you be our focus be our hope

be at the centre of our thoughts and our meditations and our contemplations when we're tempted to worry or to feel anxious help us to shift that focus onto you and to have that mysterious confidence renewed that you are ahead of us just as you are with us right now you go ahead into that future remind us of that in ever greater measure right now as we continue to worship and in the time to come in Jesus name
Amen Amen in the Lord