

The One Who Calls You is Faithful and He Will Do It

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 29 April 2018

Preacher: Rev. Dr. Russell Herbert

- [0 : 0 0] Well, we had our reading just now in 1 Thessalonians chapter 5, and there's one verse that we're going to focus on in our thoughts over these next few minutes, and it's this.
- The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it. You see, as I reflect on those words, there's one core thing that, to me, I find personally deeply challenging, that it's not about us, it's about God.
- It's not about us, it's not about the way we think, we feel, it is about God. Now, in these next few minutes, I just want to suggest five different aspects of our lives as Christians, as a church, that this is the case.
- It's about church, it's not about us, it's about God. Mission is not about us, it's about God. Worship is not about us, worship is about God. Prayer is not about us, it's about God.
- And faith is not about us, it's about God. Of the many different words that appear within the scriptures, within the Bible, to describe God, one of them is the Hebrew, El Shaddai.
- [1 : 1 4] And there's debate among translators as exactly how that should be translated from the Hebrew into the English. It's often, in English translations of the Old Testament, El Shaddai is translated into God the Almighty.
- Sometimes it's God all-powerful. Sometimes it's God all-sufficient. The one who sheds forth, the one who blesses, the one who sustains. But one commentator suggests that a good working translation, in practical terms, of that term for God, El Shaddai, is this.
- God the enough. God the enough. Think about what that might mean for you right now, just for a few moments. God the enough.
- God the enough. Now let's have a look at those five different things that I just mentioned. Church. Church is not about us.
- We might look around, see one another, and think, yeah, it's about us. But it's not. It's not about us as human beings. It is about God. I've just recently read a book called *If Entrepreneurs Ran the Church*.
- [2 : 2 9] It's a book of interviews with eight entrepreneurs, and by that I mean extremely successful businessmen and women. And they happen to also be Christians.
- And each chapter is an interview. And the interview sets out, which says, okay, so as an entrepreneur, I want you to imagine that you've just been made chief executive officer of the entire UK church.
- All of the denominations, all of the people, all of the structures and the buildings and the finances, what are you going to do with it? It's fascinating. And reading through what these entrepreneurs would do if they were running the church is interesting stuff because it really drills home the message how we need, as church in the widest possible sense, to be a lot more robustly critical in the way we do things, in our structures, in the way we manage our finance, the way that we manage our buildings, and all of those things.
- But one thing struck me more than anything else in the interviews, and it was a comment made by one entrepreneur, and I can't remember which one it was now. That's irrelevant. The comment was this.

He said that there is no business in the world, no matter how big or how successful it has been, no business in the history of the world has ever lasted more than a couple of hundred years.

[3 : 59] Never. Now, I happen to work for the Methodist church. I don't feel strongly about that denomination, but that's who pays my wages. And the Methodism alone is older than that.

The Church of England, which is the other ecumenical partner within Christchurch, is older still. But when we look in the widest sense, the church has been around for over 2,000 years.

And it always will be, simply because God ordains it to be. Now, that's no excuse for us to lapse into passivity and to think, well, God's got it all in hand, then it doesn't matter how much of a hash we make of it with our human programs and all our weaknesses that go with it.

Now, if we're not prepared to make the changes to keep up with the Holy Spirit, then God will make those changes. God will simply choose someone else to do it.

That's the pattern that history has followed. But, be sure, the Church will never die. And the reason the Church will never die is it's not about us, it's about God.

[5 : 14] Connected to that is the second thing, and that's mission. Mission is not about us, mission is about God. Now, of course, we need to be asking questions all the time about what it means in real practical terms for us to be missionary people where we live, how we can engage our communities.

We need to ask practical questions as to what that looks like. But let's not allow those questions to eclipse what is at the very heart of Christian mission.

Namely, not about how we make it relevant, but rather that we simply point towards the God who is at the centre of it all. A story that comes from a friend of mine from Uganda, I heard many years ago.

And he tells a story of how somebody that he knew was in Uganda one day in a marketplace, I'm not sure which city it was, but he was in the marketplace, and he was trying to sell mangoes.

He had a massive pile of mangoes to sell, but nobody would buy a single mango. And the reason why nobody was interested in his mangoes is that even though he thought they were great, everybody had them growing on their own trees in their own homes already.

[6 : 24] So why would anybody want to buy them? So he stood there for a couple of hours, he didn't sell a single item of fruit. Until somebody else came along and said, are these all right then? He said, they're the best. He said, do you really think that?

He said, yes, I do. He said, in which case, eat one. I said, what do you mean? He said, just eat one in front of me. So he took one of his mangoes and he stood there and just ate this thing.

As he did so, the juice just came out of the fruit and spilt down his chin, down his arm, onto the floor. And he stood there and soon forgot that he was actually there to sell them because he was enjoying this thing so much.

And as people passed by, they stopped and saw the look of enjoyment written all over this man's face and began to get curious and began to ask questions. He sold the lot.

You see, he forgot that he was trying to sell a product and remembered the thing that was the very centre of it all. Mission is not about us.

[7 : 31] Mission is about God. Worship is not about us. Worship is about God.

And the reason I say that is very often when we get onto the subject of worship in Christian circles, when we start talking about it, we very, very quickly, most of the time without even noticing we're doing it, get onto the subject of what we like and what makes us feel good.

And sometimes we might even think to ourselves, worship, you know, I don't really feel like that. And we might think, you know, I don't really feel like coming to church to worship today.

Or perhaps if I'm at home, I might not feel like worshipping God because I don't feel in a particularly strong spiritual place right now. I don't feel up there. I don't feel spiritually awake.

I'm feeling really low or worried or anxious or depressed or run down or whatever. I don't feel like worship. If you ever feel, or should I say, think that way about the way you feel, I've got good news for you.

[8 : 35] It doesn't matter how you feel because worship is not about how we feel. It is all about God. That is why in that very same passage from Thessalonians, it says, pray continually.

That means all the time. Give thanks in all circumstances. Now think about that for a moment. You probably don't have to think very far before you think of certain circumstances in which you really do not feel like praying.

But that's okay because the urge here is not give thanks for all circumstances. It's give thanks in all circumstances.

And when we can do that, when we can look at things in a way that doesn't focus in on how we're feeling and our emotional state in our mood at that particular point in time, then our attention shifts onto the one who it is all about.

Then things change. The circumstances may not be that pretty. We might not be feeling that great. But when we make God our focus, things can start to change.

[9 : 43] A few years ago, I was on holiday. I can't remember where it was. And I saw, when we were out on a walk, saw a rather interesting object. You may have seen one before because I've since noticed there. You see them in all sorts of different places.

By this wall, there was this little metal pole sticking out of the wall. On the end of the pole was a chain hanging down. And on the end of the chain was dangling a rock. And there was a little sign next to this thing.

And it was describing what it was. It said it was a weather rock. Anybody seen these? It had a list of instructions as to how you read the weather rock.

It said, if the rock, i.e. the one dangling on the end of the chain, if the rock is wet, it's raining. If the rock is swinging, it's windy.

If the rock is hard to see, it's foggy. If there's white stuff on top of the rock, it's snowing. If the rock is underwater, it's flooding.

[10 : 45] If the rock is warm, it's sunny. If there's no rock there at all, there has recently been a tornado. Not a very accurate way of getting meteorological information.

Not a reliable guide to the weather. Yet, how often do we do something not completely dissimilar with our emotions? I don't feel like this, therefore I won't worship.

I don't feel quite this way about God, therefore I'm not quite sure that the claims of Scripture are true. The thing is, moods are hardly ever, ever a reliable guide to truth.

About anything, actually, except ourselves. See, our emotions do tell us how we're feeling. Our emotions, our moods, do tell us about ourselves.

But they tell us nothing about our circumstances. They might tell us a lot about how we are reacting at that point in time to circumstances, but they don't tell us about the circumstances themselves.

[11 : 51] Our moods and our emotions don't tell us about other people. They do tell us about the responses that have been triggered within ourselves to those other people, perhaps, but they don't tell us about the actual people.

In fact, they can blind us to the truth at times. Because the one thing we see is what's going on within our own emotional machine rather than what's going on external to it.

And so if we can say that about circumstances, we can say it about people, we can most definitely say it about God. Now that's not to say that feelings aren't important. Of course they are.

But not as a measure of God's truth. You see, it's not about us. It is about God.

My favourite guitar player in the whole world is an Australian guitarist called Tommy Emanuel. He's not that famous, actually.

[12 : 53] He is in Australia, where he's from, and a lot of guitar players will know of him. But I think he's an amazing guy. If you've never come across him, look him up on YouTube. What he can't do with six strings is absolutely amazing.

He's an amazing player. But he said something a few years ago, which I've actually got written down on a plug, on my wall next to my guitar, to bring me inspiration, because I think it's an amazing quote.

He says this, One day you can pick up a guitar and feel like you're a great master. And the next day you can feel like a complete fool.

It's because we're different every day. But the guitar is always the same. Now, whether you like the sound that the guitar makes or not is irrelevant.

In fact, it applies not simply to a guitar, but to any musical instrument. In fact, you could say even more broadly, to anything that requires discipline. The thing itself pretty much stays the same.

[13 : 56] But we change. And our moods can have a massive impact on the way we perceive ourselves and our own abilities, about whether we feel like doing something or not. It's so important that we remember that about emotions, because most of the time we tend to be guided by our moods at a particular time and space.

I'm as guilty as anybody else of that. But the truth of God is something so much bigger and so much greater. Let's remember that it's not about us and about our emotions or our moods.

It's all about God. Because whilst we may change, God is always faithful and consistent. Prayer. Prayer is not about us.

Prayer is about God. And again, it's so important to remember that. If, like me, you find it hard to concentrate in prayer, and I do. I'm somebody that has always found it really hard to concentrate for a length of time.

Oh, I can easily get into prayer for a few moments where I sense the need. I think probably most people can, particularly if we're suddenly surrounded by situations like, this is urgent, I've got to pray.

[15 : 10] Right. I'm talking about that sense of prayer over a period of time. I'm talking about praying for a great length of time without the mind wandering off, thinking about, well, what am I going to do about this later on today?

Or, just remember, I haven't sent that person an email. Or, I've got to make that phone call. Or, what am I going to have for dinner? You know, our minds as human beings are naturally distracted when we try to pray and to concentrate.

And I sense, and I'm sensing more and more and more and more of this, that the problem with that is when we regard prayer as an activity, as something that we do, rather than an ongoing reality that we are called, we are invited to be a part of.

You see, prayer, prayer might be something that involves our actions, but essentially, rather than being an isolated activity that takes place in isolation from everything else, it's rather, it's rather picking up on that conversation that actually runs through all the time.

God is always there. He always is. Most of the time, we tend to forget that, but He is there. In all of those situations to which our minds become distracted whilst we're trying to pray.

[16 : 32] So, He's already there. He's already there. He always has been, He always will be. But prayer is, I think, yes, it is good to have that time when we focus in a sort of time, set aside time away, but most fundamentally, what is important is that is to cultivate that sense of awareness that God is there throughout our whole days in a way that is not compartmentalised.

You see, relationship with God is not something that we go to. So, when we sense that we need to pick it up, relationship is not with God, is not something that we go to.

Rather, in Christian faith, our relationship with God is the thing that we actually work out of. Very often, when we think of the story of Jesus, in which we have the greatest model ever of what it means to commune with the Father, we perhaps have this idea in our head that the story of Jesus is a story which tells of great things that He did, great miracles, great teachings, and then every now and then, that life of His activity, His ministry, is punctuated with those moments of prayer where we're told He withdrew and went off to pray.

Whereas, I think it is better that we look at it the other way around. That Jesus' life was actually a whole life of intimate communion with His Father. Every now and then, we get these little snapshots through His ministry, through His words, through His actions, through His miracles.

the snapshots that punctuate the relationship. It is the communion with His Father that is at the very heart of it all. Because prayer is not about the stuff that we do.

[18 : 20] It's about God. The one who calls you is faithful and He will do it. Last point. Faith. Faith itself.

Yes, we may think about what that means from a human point of view what it means to talk of the psychology of how we have faith, how we trust, how we can make ourselves vulnerable before God.

But ultimately, faith is not about us as human beings. It is about God in who we place it. The writer, Andy Stanley, he's a writer and a church leader in America.

He said this, between information and ignorance there is a gap and we can fill it either with suspicion or trust.

Let me say that again because it's pretty deep stuff. Between information and ignorance there is a gap and we can fill it either with suspicion or trust.

[19 : 25] You see, we don't know what lies ahead in our future. We are given the promises of God in Scripture. But because we haven't got there yet, it's offered to us.

We haven't yet encountered it in all its fullness. So therefore, we live in that place of not knowing. We are called to trust. We are called to have faith.

But what that faith is all about is not about our feelings or our concerns or our misgivings. It's about God. I love the story of when Jesus walked on the water and Peter was in the boat and he looked out and he saw him and he gets out of the boat and he starts to walk towards Jesus on the water too.

Everything seems to be working out fine until we're told that his attention was turned away from Jesus and to the threat that the waves and the winds presented to him.

You see, when Jesus was no longer his focus, when his thoughts went back to his circumstances and himself within those circumstances, when God was no longer at the centre, then he began to sink.

[20 : 46] One last image to lead us into prayer. And it's something I've shared before, so you may remember it, but as I was thinking about this, I couldn't get away from this image and I'd like us to take this image into prayer as we think about what these things mean for our own lives.

I've got a glass of water here and I realise that at the back this may be difficult to see because it's quite small, but I've got a little metal washer and if I drop the little metal washer into the water, it sinks.

It goes straight to the bottom. Sometimes what we can feel life and the circumstances of life that are presented to us, due to us, we feel like we're sinking.

I've got here a little strip of polystyrene. If I drop this onto the water, it floats. Now, if I take the metal washer, I can try to rest it on top of the polystyrene and it might just about float for a moment, but it quickly falls off.

Sometimes we might think that faith is about leaning on God. We might embrace that sort of language. We might think of it in those terms and think that to trust in God is about leaning on Him.

[22 : 07] In a sense, it might be, but it's not the full picture. You see, sooner or later, we fall off and we sink. There is a way in which this little metal washer can float and it's when we take this piece of polystyrene and we put it through the middle.

You see, it's only when we make God the very centre of our lives, not simply one who we lean to, but when we recognise that He's at the very centre, that it's not about us, that it is about God, that we float.

What does that mean for you right now? Is there perhaps a part particularly of your life where you feel that God might be saying, look, trust me, just take your gaze away from the circumstances and put me at the centre.

It's not about us, it is about God. It is about God.