

Grateful for God Working His Purposes Out

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Date: 04 February 2024

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[0 : 0 0] Morning, Saints. Shall we pray together? Let's pray. Father God, would you come because you are all in all. You are the one to whom we give thanks. We are so grateful, Lord, for your purposes in our lives. So, Holy Spirit, would you come and would you open us more and more to your purposes so in order that we can be grateful and give thanks and praise to you in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, I'm sure that was so, as we shared with each other, that was just a partial list of the things and how we express thanks and how we give thanks and how we're grateful for the things that God has given us and the things that we have shared. And as we continue to explore this theme of being grateful, we ask this morning, how grateful are we are to him, our God, for the outworking of his purposes in our lives. But not only just in our lives, but giving thanks and grateful for the outworking of God's life in others around us as well. And you may have already or want to start making the list. Maybe you're listing already of those things for which you are grateful, because that's a good place to start. But you may have noticed that in Isaiah 55, we are told from God very clearly that my thoughts are not your thoughts and neither are your ways my ways. And I say, praise God for that. Thank you, Lord, because I don't know about you, but God must really struggle with some of my plans and purposes. The same is probably yours as well. And maybe that's something we need to be grateful for too, because he graciously puts them on hold, certainly in my case, or I'm so pleased sometimes when he just gives them a miss. And I think the Christian fridge magnet business would have lost thousands of pounds without that theme from Jeremiah.

For I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, to give you hope and a future. It's a great verse. It's hugely encouraging. And yes, we say, Amen, Lord. Yes, your purposes prosper your plans, Lord. I am so grateful. But please, they are your plans and they're in tune with my plans and your good and perfect will.

Does that resonate with anyone else? Yeah, I can see a few people being honest and nodding. So in the planning and prospering business, how do we discern what is good and God's perfect will for our life? Well, obviously, the Word of God in the Bible is essential. Being filled with the Holy Spirit, being in tune with what he has for us, prayer, our character, our discipleship life, listening and being in tune with him. Now, don't, but don't get me wrong here. I love God's plans and purposes. I really do. And I am extremely grateful for many of them. Mandy, my children, you, my church community, my dog, our outreach, the wider family, the list goes on and on. But we can get a bit ungrateful, can't we, when his plans and purposes don't sit well with us or didn't fit in with our own personal plan and purposes. You know, I'm still getting over the fact they didn't ask me to be a bishop or the arch. No, I am only joking. That is not one of my plans. But seriously, for many listening here, I have seen people who sadly have jettisoned or struggled with God when their own personal plans didn't prosper or didn't work out the way they expected them to. And that's tough.

Maybe a relationship that didn't work out. Maybe a loved one who went home to be with the Lord far too soon than we expected or thought. An unexpected financial issue that came up and hit you, a loss of a job. Maybe a child that you had nurtured and loved all the way through their life, only to be disappointed to see them walk away from the Lord. You see, sometimes it's tough to be grateful and to fathom where God's purposes fit in our life, which we know can be filled with wilderness moments.

Probably because, if I'm being honest, we like God on our terms, don't we? You know, I prayed this, Lord, why didn't you deliver? We all have our stories. We all have our stories. Ours that jump to mind and was sensing God's will for us to sell our house when we went into ordained ministry.

[5 : 2 1] You know, it was madness. Absolute financial madness as well. And I said, you know, you say to the Lord, is this really part of your deal? Is this really got to be this way? Is this your purposes?

Because if this is your good and perfect will, God, I don't see it at the moment because it doesn't feel right. And the Lord said, yes, sell the house. Are you sure? It was a little bit stronger than that. You know I'm taking a huge financial hit, don't you, Lord? Yeah, yeah, I know, I know. But we've done everything else, but why the house? Well, where does that fit into your purposes? I just don't see that.

Surely you could leave us that. No, the house has to go. Do you know what? I didn't see God's purposes in that. And I certainly wasn't grateful. And I told him so several times.

Fast forward two years. Fast forward two years into curacy. It was on a Tuesday lunchtime. It was in Wells Cathedral. I am there with my tray, getting my lunch. Well, I'm suddenly aware of somebody stood beside me. And it turned out that it was a colleague from a department that I worked with many, many years ago that I'm not allowed to mention. And he was very kindly stood beside me. And I said, what are you doing here? And he said, I'm just passing through. I said, that's a load of rubbish.

[7 : 01] I said, passing through? If I didn't know better, you were here to bump me for a job. And he said, I am. You shouldn't leave your phone on. I always know where to find you. And with that, he offered me the most fantastic job. Back with what I was doing. But very, do you know what? At that point, I saw God's purpose as to why we sold the house.

Because there was no going back. There was only going forward. Isn't it interesting how God prospers us sometimes by showing us the things that have to go in order for us to move forward? We don't often see sometimes the reason for his planning, you know?

I think there's a tension here in our consumerist society that we expect in some cases, demand, and expect that his purposes are on our terms. And maybe we really need to look at that when we think about being grateful. You know, Lord, I'm grateful for your purposes, but they don't always have to fit with mine. Somehow his church, I believe, often loses sight of that, that we're called to serve him in his kingdom purposes, to give thanks and praise to him, even when that seems uncomfortable.

And you may be experiencing that at the moment, or at times that seems slightly bizarre or challenging. Why this way, Lord? I just don't see it. Here, Paul is writing to a newly gathered group of followers, a new church, a new church and a people that are seeking God's purposes.

They're looking, they're not really sure of the way, yet it would seem at odds are stacked against them because of the situation in which they've been placed. And that's why Paul starts in our reading today, Christ is the visible image of the invisible God. He existed before anything was created and is supreme over all creation. Why did he remind them of that? Because we need to know that God is first and central in all things because we focus on him. Once we take our focus off of that, then we lose directions and we can often struggle with what his purposes are. You know, don't get diverted because if you do, you will struggle to discern not only what is God's good and perfect will, but also the community that you're called to serve. Why does Paul state this to the Colossians?

[9 : 34] Why does he need to state what seems so obvious to us? Well, it's not far away from where we are today because they are in danger of wavering and under pressure and at risk of failing to grasp and embrace God's purposes for them. These new Colossian followers are being confronted by mid-eastern astrology, lingering Jewish traditions, a plethora of Greek gods and goddesses and a Roman empire that sought to control and dominate. Some in their following in the early church were even stating that they believed that Christ was just one in a chain of holy beings that would lead to God. So no wonder Paul has to remind them to put God front and centre. This is it. Don't get diverted. Put Jesus front and centre. For through him, God created everything in the heavenly realms on earth. He made the things we see, but he also made the things we can't see. We're not going to see it all. Sometimes we have to rely and trust on his purposes. Everything was created through him and for him before even Caesar and the stars. This is it. This is it, new church. He existed before anything else. He holds it all together.

Christ is the head of the church. He is the head. Look to him. He is the beginning. For God in his fullness was pleased to live in Christ. This new church wasn't making long-term plans.

You know, the lifespan of a Christian under Christian rule and Jewish influence wasn't something you planned too far ahead. Believe me, it knocks our plans into a top hat.

You know, maybe in our safe westernized Christian view, we have lost the courage, the urgency and the passion of the moment by trying to plan ahead. Paul lived on the edge in and out of prison for his teaching and faith. He knew God's purposes, but it was very much day to day. Preach the

gospel, grow communities of faith, encourage, teach, empower and play, but be honest, we don't know all of God's purposes. We don't know God's purposes for us in that great journey from salvation through life to the glory that is waiting for us. I sense Paul is saying to me in the scripture, put Jesus front and center in all you do. But please don't make too many concrete plans because they may not align themselves with my purposes for you and I may need a bit of flexibility. Or your plans just mean you've missed my purpose. Every corporation that you might have been in, do maybe look to do a five-year plan.

Oh, this is our five-year plan. This is what we're going to do. I don't know whether you've been part of that. You know, two years in, have a look and see whether that's still right. Because things change.

[12:59] Every things, you can't set things in concrete. Yet you and I know how sadly our plans can be interrupted by life. And again and again, we have to come back to him and ask again and again, what's your plan and purpose in this situation, Lord? What are you doing? What are you showing me?

What do you want me to do? For those things, I need to be grateful. And along with many, I'm sensing that this church, especially in the West, maybe need to re-engage with that afresh, especially in some areas where we need to turn back to Jesus, to God's word, to drop some of the inherited, traditional baggage and seek God's purposes afresh, where we have in some ways become comfortably complacent and self-seeking, to seek him afresh and be grateful of his purposes.

We haven't been to tomorrow, but God has. Love you to walk away with that. We haven't been to tomorrow yet, but he has. Paul encourages this early church and ourselves to put God up front and center and trust him in the tomorrow. One minute, they're giving thanks as the people in the Bible. People had to trust and follow God's purposes. You know your Bible. You've read it, whether you're new to the Bible or you've been reading it all your life. You will know that God's purposes again and again are lived out, not in the way in which his people expected them. You know, here we have Moses. He's led his people out of freedom, out of slavery to freedom. Whoopee! We're there! What a great day that was.

And where are we? Now we're in the desert. You know, it's hard sometimes to fathom God's purposes day by day. And then there was Joshua. Joshua didn't know what God would do, but he trusted in God's purposes.

And in seeking God's purposes, he realized that they had to be ready. They had to be ready to fulfill whatever God's purposes were for them. He told the people, purify yourself. In modern day terms, it's get yourself ready. Get yourself right with God because you don't know what's coming tomorrow.

[15:30] Yeah, okay, they went through all the rituals, but for us today, get yourself ready with God. What does that look like? Clean hands, pure heart, putting yourself right with God day by day because we don't know what tomorrow comes. Why? Because we want to fulfill God's purposes that have not yet been fully disclosed. So how do you get ready for what God's purposes might be? Stay close to Jesus. Stay close to him. That lovely rabbinic thing, which I just love, be covered by the dust of your rabbi. Stay so close that you will be covered by everything that he has for you. And as we individually as a gathered people of God make it ready, we need to be ready in case suddenly God decides to bring revival.

You know, the chaos, the sheer numbers. Joshua told his people to be ready. The most important thing is to get our hearts right with him because his purpose tomorrow may be to do a radically new thing.

The most important thing we think, do you anticipate, are we expectant of seeing God's purposes? Do you wake up in the morning and think, oh, it's a new day. What's God going to do? What it must have been like to be a disciple to wake up in the morning and think, what are we going to see today? What's he going to do? Can I see people healed? Can I see people rolling up their mat, walking away? What's going to happen? What's Jesus going to say? What's this excitement that we should have? You know, lived out in our lives and the lives of this church. If we do, if we are serious, then we need to be ready in prayer. See you tomorrow evening, 7.30.

You know, praying in our home groups, praying together, praying individually, being ready for whatever God may be doing. I meet people who tell me their church is boring.

[17:34] If you meet people who think their church fellowship is boring, can I suggest that they aren't alert, expectant, and getting ready and preparing for God's purposes amongst them?

Because that's the way we should be. Ready, expected, excitement for what the next thing is going to be. Yes, I hear the excuses. We tried that once. We haven't the resources. We haven't the money.

We haven't time. There isn't enough of us. We haven't done this since three vicars ago. Often we are called to prepare ourselves so God can use us. We need to step up and step out and enter into his purposes. Joshua was leading his people to the promised land. That's what he'd been told to do. You know, that was God's purpose. He told the people to purify themselves, to get ready.

They didn't know what was coming. They just knew that they were going somewhere. And it was God. The river Jordan was in full flood. It seemed an impossible hurdle to get two million people to the other side. Joshua knew God's purpose, but not the way. We read it in hindsight. He didn't know.

You know, are the waters going to part again? Will he ask us to build a bridge? Will he ask us to build some marks? Joshua didn't know. He had no idea how God was going to do it, but he knew that he would.

[19 : 14] I think we need to hear that this morning as we give thanks for the great things that he has done in our lives. That God will do it. The people knew that God was going before them.

You have done this before. You will do it again, Lord. You've done it before, and you will do it again. Maybe we need to hear that on the days that we become ungrateful. God, you have done this before, and I know you will do it again. Probably not in the way we expect, but you will do it. He has done great things. He does great things, and he will do great things. I often marvel, as you probably do, at the Welsh revivals in 1904 and 1905. You know, evangelical and Pentecostal churches in many countries have grown out of that and are still growing because of that great move of God. David Lloyd George, in one of his speeches before 1904, said, the material conditions of this country will not improve until there comes a spiritual awakening, and I charge you ministers with the responsibility of promoting and fostering such a revival.

Wow. A move of the Holy Spirit that seized people's attention. The Holy Spirit lit a beacon in those places where people met early in the morning. They met light at night. They opened God's Word. They read.

There was lights in villages, in little places where people met during the day, where they gathered together. Churches overflowed. Chapels overflowed in this great movement. People came to faith. Crime rate dropped. People were singing praises on their way to the pit, in the pit, and on their way back to the pit. Communities were transformed. People were sent all over the world. One commentary reads, perhaps one of the most important lessons we need to learn from 1904 revival is that good as we are at arranging new strategies and structures for our churches. We cannot arrange a revival. It's down to God and us being ready to respond. And we can and should be prepared for it. For when God sees the right time is right, we must respond by ensuring that it reaches out in society. Many of us will remember recently, 2023 in March, I was glued to the television for the Asprey revival. This community that started off in a college where they just started off praying and then it just didn't stop.

It just went. People came. I was riveted to watch people walk in through a door to come down, to stand there who had had very little contact at all and give their life to Christ, clearly impacted by the Holy Spirit. We want more of that? Everybody's nodding for the podcast.

[22 : 24] And I hope you're nodding at home. Grateful for God working his purpose. This is a God who can do it and do it again. Do it again, Lord, we pray. Make us ready. Make us ready. Keep us watchful.

Keep us grateful. Keep us thankful. Keep us doing. When Joshua and the people of God were faced with the river, they had to cross. The Lord asked the priests carrying the ark of the covenant, those who were leading, to have faith and purpose. They had to step into the water before they knew God's purpose. That's what the Lord asked them. Not to stand on the bank, bang, and say, oh, it seems a bit too cold. Or has anybody done a risk assessment? He asked them to actually step into the water. Once they had been faithful and stepped into the water, that's when they parted. And sometimes it takes for us to actually respond to God's call, to step into his purposes for us, to step in. And then the Lord reveals what he wants to do, because he knows we're willing, and he knows we're ready. And they were grateful. It says the people were grateful. I think that's a bit of an understatement. I think if I had the waters apart in front of me in 2000, two million people walked over. I think I'd generally be happy if you know the saving power of Jesus in your life, then you will

know what that gratefulness means. The same as they did. Because we often take that for granted, don't we? The saving power of God in our lives is something that we put front and centre day by day by day to give thanks to him. God's purpose doesn't have to be huge, but often when we respond, it ripples out. I had a picture this week that was given to us, Ezekiel 47. The temple had been desecrated, but there was a trickle of water that came from the temple. And that trickle, in theory, should have dried up, but it didn't. In this picture that Ezekiel had, it turned into a river, it turned into more, and then it turned into a flood. Never underestimate what God's purpose is for each and every one of us, because often it starts like a trickle. We don't know the purpose of what God's going to do, because we've started something and responded to his call. Maybe that might be asking somebody to come here. It might be asking somebody to come to a group. It might be spending time with them. It might be sacrifice. Whatever that purpose is that God's given you, it's a trickle. And we may not even know until eternity what that flood looks like, that we've started. It grows out and grows big. There's a film currently doing the rounds. It's called One Life. I don't know whether you've seen it. And it's the story of Sir Nicholas Winton, who was responsible for the famously known Kindertransport. It rescued 669 Jewish children from Nazi-occupied Czechoslovakia at the brink of World War II. Most of the children never saw their parents again. They were either murdered or moved to concentration camps. In 1988, Esther Ransson invited him to a studio where he sat and they celebrated what he had done. Unbeknowing to him, most of the audience were the adults, which were children, that he'd saved. A trickle turns into a flood. What a beautiful moment. Sometimes the trickle turns into a river and turns into a flood. I would imagine that's only a fraction of the people that owe their life to Sir Nicholas Winton. Children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren. This morning, as we think about God's purpose, let's rededicate ourselves to God's purpose and be grateful. To share our gratitude with him and with others. To make God's purposes central to our discipleship. Should we ask for that openness afresh? Should we ask for that again this morning? Almost that getting ready again. Lord, yet we know your plans, we know your purposes, but actually truly we do want to be ready and we want to rededicate ourselves to you. Should we do that? Should we ask for the courage maybe to step out into his purposes?

To step into that place where things happen because he wants them to happen? To a God who can and will. And we pray that prayer, that ancient prayer, that simple prayer, but that powerful prayer of come Holy Spirit.

[27 : 45] Lord, should we just do that now together? Maybe you just want to hold out your hands. Maybe you just want to put your hands together, however you feel you want to kneel.

Not if you're driving on the podcast. Make us ready, Lord. Holy Spirit, would you come and prepare us? Lord, we're aware that we may need to ask for any barriers to fall.

To fulfill your purposes in us and through us. Skepticism, doubt, resistance. The question of how can you use me?

The defeatist language, Lord, that the evil one gives us if we're too old or we're too young or we're not equipped.

I haven't been a Christian for long, so how can you use me? Maybe that thing is I haven't given my life to you, Lord.

[28 : 58] Then do it now. Now. In the simplicity of the moment, just give your life to him. Or rededicate your life to him. And ask for a fresh filling of his Holy Spirit that enables, empowers, enthuses, excites, and stirs up the gifts in us to make us ready.

Maybe just in the stillness you want to use a single word. To be grateful to God. Maybe he's showing you things where there is a purpose that he has for you which maybe he desperately wants you to engage with.

Maybe he needs you to cut away from the thing that's holding you back from that. Maybe he's seeking his purpose. Maybe he's seeking his purpose to lead others to him.

Maybe he's seeking his purpose to lead others to him. Lord, Lord, we're so grateful for his purpose. Holy Spirit, come. Lord, we are so grateful for your purposes and thankful.

Would you make us ready? Would you make our ways clear? Would you give us boldness and courage? Would you soften hearts and strength and wills?

[30 : 27] Lord, would we see others coming into relationship with you? Lord, would you move the trickle in our life into a flood for your purposes, we pray.

In Jesus' name.