

God's Faithfulness to Himself

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: 12 January 2025

Preacher: Rev. Dr. Russell Herbert

[0 : 00] A friend was recently telling me about a holiday that they'd taken in Los Angeles. There's one thing in particular that fascinated me, and indeed fascinated them, that was a highlight, and that was a lift that they'd had in a car.

Several times, they summoned this lift with an app on their phone. They got in the car, they went to their destination, they paid via the app, and then they got out.

You might think, what's so unusual about that? Well, it was the actual nature of the car itself. It wasn't a taxi, it wasn't an Uber, it was what they call a robo-taxi.

It didn't have a driver. And they described how this, they called AVs, autonomous vehicles, how this empty car drove up, sure enough, as ordered, and then they got in.

Didn't quite know whether they were going to say hello to anybody, but they drove off, and then they watched on the phone as this car took them to different places. It stopped when it needed to, it started when it needed to, it slowed down, it sped up, and all the while the steering wheel is just turning by itself.

[1 : 21] And then eventually, they got out. Now, if you're thinking that, well, that's in America, we're safe here. May last year, there was a law passed in the UK Parliament, the automated vehicle law, an act, sorry, passed in May 2024, and these things are expected to be on the UK streets in 2026.

Now, we might have mixed feelings about this, but those that argue in favour of driverless cars say that there's a sense in which they are much, much safer.

Why? Well, because you don't have the human error behind the wheel. Because these things are controlled by computers, then assuming that the computers themselves don't have any human error in them, and that, I guess, is the point.

But these things are consistent. They don't get tired. They're not distracted. They don't get emotionally engaged in the driving experience.

I want you to imagine your life as a journey in a car. As followers of Jesus, we're called to entrust our lives to God completely.

[3 : 01] Staying with that image of life as a journey in a car, which would you prefer, honestly? To be driven by a machine, a robot, that's completely consistent, free of human error?

Or would you rather that there be a person behind the wheel that's taking you through your life? We are called to entrust our lives to God.

When we talk about entrusting our lives in him, we are talking about the one who is unique, in that he is perfect.

Perfectly free from human error. He's not going to get tired. He's not going to get distracted. But he's not a machine.

He's also perfectly personal. God is perfectly faithful. And only God is perfectly faithful.

[4 : 21] And as we begin this series, thinking about what we mean by that word, faithful, faithful, it's helpful to begin by what we mean by God's faithfulness to God's own self, to his own being, his own character.

See, God, and only God, is completely, perfectly, absolutely faithful and consistent to his own character, to his promises, to his word, to his glory.

And that's important. Because if we understand that, then we can understand the nature of what we mean by faithfulness, as we come to apply that in our own lives.

So let's just unpack that a little bit more, over these next few minutes, as we dip into this story, from the book of Exodus. Let's just recap the background leading up to this moment in the story.

The people of God have been held in captivity in Egypt. God will not see his people suffer any longer. And so under the leadership of Moses, those people leave Egypt.

[5 : 35] Miraculously, God opens the way for them to go. They are pursued by the Egyptian army. They want to bring them back as slaves, or kill them. But they're pursued by them.

But when the people are caught between the army that is chasing after them, and the sea, God miraculously parts the waters, and they can travel through to safe land.

As the army are pursuing them, then the waters close. The enemy is stopped. But God, having landed them safe on the other side of the water, doesn't leave them to it there.

He says, I will be with you. I will feed you. I will take care of you. It only begins here. I lead you into freedom. And so he gives them the law in order to protect them.

And to say, I'm with you. I'm not going to abandon you now I've set you free. I'm always with you.

And as that law is given, Moses, their leader, is taken up onto the mountain, and he receives what we refer to as the Ten Commandments.

[6 : 48] They're written on tablets of stone. He's up on that mountaintop for quite a while. And while he was up there, the people of God, who have been set free and protected and saved and gone through all of this, now decide that in fact they're going to build another God and worship that instead.

So they have a bit of a whip round. They take out their gold. They throw it in together. They melt it together. And they craft a golden calf. And they start to circle around this thing and bow down and worship it.

Moses comes down from the mountain, sees what's going on, and throws the Ten Commandments written on the stone, throws them down in his anger, and they smash.

It's a sober reminder of how very quickly we can forget about the glory of God.

These people had been through all of that, and yet it only seems to take a very short period to be able to turn your back on God and forget all about him.

[8 : 02] It's a story that is there within our scriptures to remind us in our own humanity of how easy it is to do that as human beings.

And it is there to remind us of the stark contrast that exists between the faithfulness of God and the faithlessness of human beings.

You see, if people can be so quick so quick to forget about how good and faithful God is, in that situation, how much more easy is it for us in our own lives to forget about God and to turn our back on him?

But you know this story is it holds up the contrasts. Yes, it's about our own human faithlessness, but it is about as much God's faithfulness to these people.

because what we see and as that contrast is held before us is God does not give up on them then.

Moses is called back up onto the mountain and God says, I'm going to write it down again.

[9 : 11] I'm going to give you a second copy of these commands. And my glory is going to pass over you. And we have this image how the presence of God, we can barely imagine what this is like, but the presence of God passes over Moses.

And Moses himself cannot look upon God because God is so perfectly loving, so perfectly faithful, so absolutely holy that nobody, no human person can look on him and live.

This is a theme that is carried right through the Old Testament. We see, for example, the prophet Isaiah in Isaiah chapter 6 when he has that vision of the presence of God before him, but he can't actually see God, he just sees this bright light and he sees the heavenly angelic host and they're winged creatures and with one set of wings they're actually covering their eyes because even the heavenly beings cannot look upon God in his holiness and survive.

I guess all of us will have different experiences of encountering God, God's holiness. For me, it was when I was, the earliest I suppose the most foundational experience was when I was 12 years old and went along with a number of our youth group to a Christian gathering and I'd never experienced anything like this before but we went into, I grew up in a church that was a very, very traditional church which had an organ and hymns out of a book and we went along and we got really bored every Sunday and cold every Sunday.

Well, some things don't change but hopefully you're not bored even if we're cold. And we were taken along to this meeting, this gathering where this Christian speaker that I'd never heard of before was speaking and was told to expect amazing things to happen.

[11 : 09] I thought, well, what amazing thing can happen when you're sitting together in what is a church service that's not in a church and not on a Sunday. But anyway, I went along with it because

all my friends at the youth group were going along to it and we were sat there and I remember sitting there in this, as a 12 year old, in this hall and listening to this guy talk for what seemed like about 12 hours.

It wasn't. But I was bored, senseless. I couldn't remember what, I can't remember to this day anything that he said. But then afterwards a music group got together and they started leading in a time of worship and started singing these songs that I didn't know but I thought, these are great, these are really kind of really contemporary.

It was the 1980s. But as people were worshipping, they started to worship God in a way that I'd never seen before. Their arms were going up in the air, people were weeping, people were smiling, happiness.

People didn't seem upset but people were flowing with tears and something was going on and I thought, what is this? I'd never experienced people worship God in this way, sort of way before. So you can imagine I was really freaked out when somebody in a member of our youth group was standing next to me, his arms went up in the air and I thought, what's happened to him?

[12:23] And then he turned over, he turns to me and he placed his hand on the top of my head. And I remember thinking, whoa, what are you doing? This is my personal space. But before I had a chance to object, something happened.

And it changed everything for me. Now I was only 12 but I can remember it now as clear as day. Now I don't know, I can't say this categorically, but I've got a feeling I probably wouldn't be standing here right now had that not happened.

Because over those next few moments, I felt this sense of what I can only describe as the holy otherness of God come upon me. I didn't have the language to describe it in those days. I was 12. But all of a sudden I started to well up with tears.

I started to shake. My heart started to beat like I'd never experienced. And I felt something of the living presence of God. Which was later explained to me by our, I wasn't the only one this happened to, this was our whole youth group suddenly went down.

I suddenly realised if I didn't sit down I was literally going to be blown off my feet. And over the next few weeks our youth leaders, God bless them, had the challenge of trying to explain to us what it means to experience the Holy Spirit.

[13:38] But you know, however, however we experience it, for Moses it was in the cleft of a rock, maybe in a church on Sunday, maybe in a home group. It can be anywhere. You know, my old superintendent minister when I was a probationer told me that it happened to him when he was in the bath one evening.

But it's there for all of us. Absolutely every one of us. Now why am I sharing that with you? Well, it's because we get such the wrong idea of what holiness means.

When we're talking about the holiness of God, it's the holy otherness of God. But it's not a horrid thing, it's not a bad thing that casts us aside. What we are talking about is this radical otherness that contrasts so starkly with our own humanity.

Such that, in his grace, God chooses to allow us to encounter him. And such that when that happens, that which is so perfectly faithful and consistent, but not like a machine, like a computer, in a profoundly, perfectly personal way, meets with our humanity and all of our imperfection and all of our weakness and everything that is wrong with us as humans, when we meet with that, we can't stare him in the face because we go up in a puff of smoke.

But you can still meet with him. Moses did. Countless people throughout history have and still do today. And still do today.

[15:17] God's faithfulness is perfect. And his faithfulness and his holiness and his perfection, these are all things that all converge when we come to think of the character of God.

Ah, what I hear you say, how can you talk of God being so perfect when you read these very verses from Exodus that we've looked at this morning? Let me read them back to you. I'm referring to verse 7 of chapter 34.

It says, God does not leave the guilty unpunished. He punishes the children and their children, their children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation.

Surely, is that not where God at best sounds like a cold clinical machine or at worst like some resentful unforgiving person? Well, I'm not going to pretend that these verses, these passages are easy and I don't want to just skate over them lightly or casually but I would say a couple of points.

Firstly, if we are to read those verses, do not read them without reading first the verses that precede them which say the compassionate and gracious God slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin.

[16:39] That is who God is. So however we make sense of themes of justice and punishment they must be read through that lens. But the second thing and this is perhaps more complex and again I don't pretend that it's easy to understand but in the revelatory history of God we need to remember that the Bible is not one book it's a whole library written over many, many centuries.

but in that story that is told by the time Jesus is teaching he says quite something that makes it quite clear. Let's look from look at John chapter 9 first three verses when Jesus encounters a man who is blind he makes it quite clear that generations are not cursed.

as Jesus went along he saw a man blind from birth his disciples asked him Rabbi who sinned this man or his parents that he was born blind?

Neither this man nor his parents sinned said Jesus but this happened so that the works of God may be displayed in him.

so clearly Jesus is saying that we're not talking about a kind of lasting curse but likewise we need to remember that there is the reality of sin so how do we piece all of this together?

[18:12] well when we piece these things together the reality of sin but the reality of God's love and forgiveness we see a theme emerge.

you see it doesn't take long for sin and evil to set its claws in us as individuals and as a society and surely we don't have to think too long and hard to see how this happens generationally that when a generation turns its back on God there are consequences it is not that God hates us and wants us to suffer the very opposite but these are words of warning that when one generation turns its back on God there will be consequences because a life without God is a life that is not worth living when a society and a culture turns its back on God its values and its cultural norms change very quickly indeed when different moral values become enshrined in law societal values change rapidly you know what

I'm talking about John Wesley said what one generation tolerates the next will embrace it doesn't take long for the cultural norms of any society to change when we forget about the goodness of God and we're warned about this centuries later Paul picks up the theme in 1 Corinthians chapter 10 it's coming up on the screen where he refers specifically to this story from Exodus that we're looking at today Paul writes this for I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact brothers and sisters that our ancestors were all under the cloud that they passed through and that they passed through the sea they were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea they all ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them and that rock was Christ nevertheless

God was not pleased with most of them their bodies were scattered in the wilderness now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did do not be idolaters as some of them were as it is written the people sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in revelry we should not commit sexual immorality as some of them did and in one day 23,000 of them died we should not test Christ as some of them did and were killed by snakes and do not grumble as some of them did and were killed by the destroying angel these things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us on whom the culmination of the angels has come so if you think you are standing firm be careful that you don't fall no temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind and God is faithful he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear but when you are tempted he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it a few years ago

I think it was New York I'm not sure it was an American city it doesn't really matter which one it was there was a city and a car had been stolen and the police went out of their way to suddenly draw attention to the fact that this car had been stolen everybody was put on high alert they were trying to put it out everywhere posters they were putting it out on radio they were putting it out on TV everywhere desperately trying to salvage the car and more importantly the person that had stolen this car why so much fuss well it wasn't because of the car itself it was what was in the glove compartment of this car you see in that glove compartment there was a pack of biscuits the biscuits contained rat poison the owner of the car had a problem with rats at home and they had been told to get some biscuits and to get some rat poison and to infuse the biscuits with the rat poison and put them out they'd done this and for some reason they were being stored in the glove compartment

of the car and the reason why so much fuss was being made we've got to find whoever stole that car we've got to bring them in is because who knows what's going to happen to those poisoned biscuits biscuits sometimes our understanding of themes such as law rules urgency warning can be so profoundly misunderstood you see the reason God sets before us rules and laws is not because he wants to stop us from living life fully the very opposite

[23 : 44] God is faithful to us as individuals and as a society and he wants us to live life fully and that is why he sets out this is how to live not because he wants us to stop having fun but because he wants to set us free and you know we need laws we need rules we need structure 1993 I was a student and I spent three weeks of that summer working in Canning Town in East London with an organisation called Youth for Christ it was a sort of a the project was called Street Invaders there was about a hundred of us young people from all over the country and we stayed in that part of East London for those few weeks and during the day we were out on the streets meeting young people in the parks and going up with leaflets and inviting them to the stuff that the church was doing in the evenings and in the evenings we had a number of things going on at the church we had various different sports going on and games and stuff like that and then there was a moment where the young people were gathered together and we gave them a message about Christ

I have no idea how this happened but somehow I ended up in a sports hall that was part of this church complex in which a load of 14 year old lads were playing football the reason I said I don't know why that happened is those of you who know me know that I can't do anything with a ball I just can't in fact I can't do anything with any sports at all it's not only the fact that I don't know I'm not very good at actually controlling a ball it's just I never understand the rules either I never have been able to I was always the last kid at school to be picked for the team you know so you can imagine how terrified as though it wasn't terrifying enough for me already how terrified I was when I found myself in this hall surrounded by a load of teenage lads and the guy who was meant to be refereeing this football match was called away and handed me his whistle let me just say that that was the closest to dying that I think I've ever become several minutes in and there was absolute chaos why because there were no rules

I didn't understand this game at all I still don't and as such I had absolutely no sense of authority in that situation I didn't know what was going on and absolute chaos broke out thankfully thankfully before either the police or an ambulance had to be called the youth worker in charge came back in and peace was restored without rules there's chaos when we don't live by those codes as a society when we forget about God and his moral laws for our lives it doesn't take long for things to change but as sobering as that thought may be let's remember that this story in

Exodus is there to remind us yeah of our own human unfaithfulness but more fundamentally of God's faithfulness you see this story here doesn't end with us just you know with the people's faces just being rubbed in their own sin but rather things are restored God does not give up on those who give up on him and the law is written out again the ten commandments are written again on stone for Moses to share with his people and to pass on down the generations but it doesn't even end there because God is not just a machine in his consistency God is so profoundly personal and so as the law is given yes the law is given but with it an almighty dose of the loving presence of God as Moses encounters him in all his wonderful loveliness Lord you are endlessly compassionate and faithful and loving that you will not give up on your people and we thank you for that that for those many times that we have turned our backs on you and let you down and lived lives that have been self-focused thank you that you don't give up on us because you are relentless in your love Holy Spirit come and fill our hearts now Holy Spirit come continue to move in our hearts in Jesus name to pack throughisters