

Our Faithfulness to God in Hard Times

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[0 : 0 0] Well, as I said at the beginning, it is a real joy to be with you and to bring a bit of a message today. And for those of you that don't know me, my name is Kate. I know I said it at the beginning. I live here in Clevedon, well, just outside now, Ken, it's like two minutes outside Clevedon. And I've been part of the community here at Christchurch since about 2005. I'm wife to Pete, and we've got the little pub in Hill Road. Tim, thanks for praying for the businesses in Clevedon this morning. It's a real community, and it does feel like having one of those spaces is real heart of our community here in Clevedon.

My passion is church and community and family. We're also mum to three children, grown up, nearly all grown up. And I worked for Christchurch for eight years doing the children's families work. And he's now doing a fantastic, sterling job with that. And I now work for a charity called TLG, Transforming Lives for Good. We partner with that charity as a church, and I still go into school each week and a few people smiling. They also do that, coaching children around emotional well-being. So that's a little bit about me. I'm now going to tell you something else about me. I love swimming. I've always loved swimming. I particularly love swimming.

I love swimming outside. Rivers, the sea, and I don't mind if it's cold. I've been doing it a long time before it got uber trendy and all the kit. Who knew there could be so much kit for a sport? But I do now own a dry robe. Don't tell too many people. Pete's got an absolute aversion to dry robes unless they're worn immediately after you've been for a swim. So me wearing it on the side of the rugby pitch is not really kind of the thing to do. Anyway, I love swimming. Or I did love swimming until this time. No, it was January last year when my dear friend Alex, the other warden here at Christchurch. Alex is Helen's husband. Messaged me on a cold winter morning to say, I've signed you up for a swim, Kate. I'm doing it too. And we're going to do the castle to castle swim in Cornwall. It was in six months' time. And I have to tell you, my first response was just apprehension, nerves. I'd never done anything like it. I've brought a painting off of our wall just as a, didn't do a PowerPoint. This is where we swam, not just across this little bit here, guys.

That's the castle over there. And we swam to here. So I was very nervous, but I thought, I can give this a go. So I did all the training, taught myself, and Alex helped me a bit to learn, to show you, learn front crawl, you know, with your heads down in the water.

And the day came for the swim. We went down to Cornwall. I think I was feeling fairly peaceful. I've got this. I've done my training. Hadn't factored in British weather, even in June.

[3 : 0 3] So the forecast came in. We went over the bay in a boat. It was getting choppier. It was getting windier. We walked up to the castle. They announced that they were thinking about cancelling the swim, at which point I'm thinking, oh, that'd be such a shame. But they didn't cancel the swim. They advised for people to go home if they wanted to, if it was new, and, you know, they hadn't done it before.

But I felt like, I've come this far. I've got to go for it. I'm sharing this story with you this morning, because, of course, as I came to this theme, faithfulness to God in the hard times, I was drawn to just think about a story that I felt able to share. Obviously, there's much more personal experiences that we've been through, or we're going through, that wouldn't be so appropriate to share. But my swim, I can share. It was a challenge. It was a difficult thing to do.

Carolyn is nodding. It was really hard. And do you know what? It didn't look anything like I thought it was going to look. I'd done the training. I was like, I'm going in a straight line straight across this bay. I'm going to be ploughing forwards, only just slightly behind Alex, who's annoyingly very good at swimming. And that is not what it looked like for me. I got in the water, realised very quickly that the waves were just going to bash me from the side the whole way over.

So I took my goggles off, and I just swam up and down every wave. And after an hour and 20 minutes, I kind of fell onto the beach the other side, promptly burst into tears. I didn't think I was going to.

Saw Alex burst into tears. Pure relief. But I did get there. It just didn't look like I thought it was going to look. How much is that a metaphor for life and experiences? Life is full of challenges.

[5 : 03] One's much more personal than the swim I've just described. Health issues, relationship breakdowns, financial struggles, isolation, being marginalised, grief, loss, just naming a few that things that will affect all of us at some point in our lives, and maybe for many of us, some of us, things that we're experiencing right now. Today, we're making a bit of space. I like this bit.

To pause. To pause. To think. To listen. I pray that God will speak to us all through what he's given me this morning.

And we're thinking about what does our faithfulness look like to God in the hard times. When I first kind of got the theme, I was like, oh, that's interesting. It's our faithfulness to God, not God's faithfulness to us in the hard times, but we'll come on to that.

So how would you describe faithfulness? What does it mean to you? I took a bit of time to ponder and really landed with being full of faith. Faithful.

That loyalty, that steadfastness, trustworthiness in our relationship with God. And I love here, Grace, thank you for bringing our reading this morning, those words about being encouraged to run the race with perseverance. There's an energy to it.

[6 : 58] Not to give up. Keep going. And the race that's marked out for us, a strong sense of keeping going, knowing where we're going, believing there's a way through, that there is a path marked out for us, even if we can't see it, or it doesn't look like what we think it's going to look like.

But life can feel like such a battle at times. And followers of Jesus are really alert to the fact that there is a spiritual battle going on in this broken world, very present. And then add into the fact we're all human. We've just sung a song that has those lyrics about God being God. Being human is what connects all of us. We're wonderfully made. We're God's plan. We're made in his image to be the body of God on earth, his hands and feet, uniquely made. But as humans, we are not perfect. We are not God.

And tough times in life can really take their toll on our spiritual, emotional well-being, the capacity we have. When life is hard, we do get tired. We do get weary. We do struggle. We are human. And it's in those moments when being faithful, full of faith, can feel like more of a challenge.

The thing we're struggling with can suddenly be the main thing in every room. Everywhere we turn, it's taking up all of our mental and emotional capacity. There isn't a lot of room for anything else.

The rhythms that maybe keep us connected in faith with God. We've just been, not long ago, we were thinking about the Practicing the Way sermon series and all those things that we kind of get into our lives to help us stay grounded and steady. Those things can slip, leaving us feeling like things are harder than ever. So I am very thankful that just after the writer of Hebrews is talking about running the race with perseverance, the path marked out, straight after that, that writer reminds us that the thing we need to do more than anything else is fix our eyes on Jesus.

[9 : 45] Fix our eyes on Jesus. Why? It tells us because he is the pioneer and the perfecter of our faith.

He who calls us is faithful and he does it. That's the tension we hold the whole time. Have you heard of co-regulation? It's kind of a really buzzy new word in the work that I'm doing.

Co-regulation. It's when a child, usually a child, is really, really struggling to regulate their emotions. It's clinically proven that one of the things that will help them most is an adult alongside them.

Emotionally steady, emotionally steady, helping them to feel emotionally safe, emotionally steady, connecting with them relationally to bring calm to their emotions.

And it occurred to me, Jesus is like the ultimate co-regulator. Fix our eyes on Jesus.

[11 : 01] He is the place where we find true rest. Where we find a solid footing for our feet.

Fix your eyes on Jesus. What do you see? Love. What do we learn? Hope.

I love the worship song, Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus. We can't fix our eyes on Jesus if we're not looking at him. Turn your eyes upon Jesus.

Look full in his wonderful face.

Turn your eyes on Jesus. And the things of earth will grow strangely dim in the light of his glory and grace. Turn.

[12 : 20] Our faith may be truly tested at times and especially in really hard times. But in 2 Timothy, we're reminded that even if we are faithless, he remains faithful.

For he cannot disown himself. He is in us. He remains faithful even when we feel like we are faithless.

What a relief. What a relief. And God promises throughout the Psalms, promises to be close to the broken hearted.

With us in the valley of the shadow of death. With us in the darkness. God is with us in the hard times. The Bible's full of story after story of people facing struggle and experiencing massive doubt and fear.

Guess what? They're human. We're in good company. But in the Bible, we read of these heroes of faith. God is with them and they are modelling determined faithfulness in the midst of life's challenges.

[13 : 31] We heard Ruth's story last week. Listen to it if you haven't heard Russ speaking about Ruth. We might think of Daniel or Job or Paul and Silas in prison but singing praises to God.

Faithfulness is a commitment to trust and believe in God's promises. Even when it feels like he's absent. Even when things don't look like we thought they were going to look like.

Because we thought we were equipped and we knew where we were going and we were just going to get there. God is faithful. So, what about some practical things that actually help us to remain faithful when things are really difficult?

Well, the first one I think has to be prayer. I'm reading this great book. I'd really recommend it. A Praying Life by Paul Miller. Some of you may have read it already. Prayer.

That connection with God. Philippians 4 says this. Do not be anxious about anything. I love that. Because just in its very wording, it's just a reminder that God knows that we do get anxious about things.

[14 : 53] But the encouragement is to not be anxious, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.

And the peace of God, which passes all our understanding, the peace of God, which can surprise us, will guard our hearts and our minds in Christ Jesus.

Consistent prayer, even when times are hard, is one of the things that will help us to remain faithful. I'm just going to read one paragraph from this book.

I opened it last night looking for something, and it was where I got to in the book. That's helpful. It says, Years ago I went through a time when life was so difficult, I was unable to pray.

I thought, ah, I can relate to that. I can see people in this room that have prayed us through things in our lives at a time when I couldn't find the words.

[16 : 01] I couldn't concentrate, so I stopped trying to have a coherent prayer time, and for weeks on end, during my morning prayer time, now he doesn't say I did nothing.

He says, I did nothing but pray Psalm 23. I was fighting for my life. I didn't realise it at the time, but I was following the habit of a divine reading called Lectio Divina, which was developed by the early church.

this idea of just reading a passage over and over, praying slowly through a portion of scripture, and I was allowing the scripture to shape my prayers.

Pray. Second one, worship. It can feel really counterintuitive. I, we all have our preferences of hymns we love, songs we love, the types of music, the style of music, but that song we sang just before, Sovereign Over Us, last year there was a time, I had to find that song, I had, I just whispered in Helen's ears, Michael Smith, I think his name is, worship leader from years ago.

Even in the valley you are faithful. I needed to find that song, because that's what I needed, to worship with those words. Praising God, knowing that he is faithful, even in the valley, and even what the enemy means for evil, he turns it, God turns it, for our good.

[17 : 34] He is faithful. Get praising. Worshipping God, God gets us on the ground. And we talk a lot in the work that I do as well, about staying grounded.

When there's an emotional rollercoaster, just happening all around you, quite often that might be people you're caring for, your children, other people in life, there's that emotional rollercoaster, and what tends to happen?

We just get pulled onto the rollercoaster, and there we are, we're on the ride as well. If we can care for ourselves, and find ways to stay grounded, we can keep that boundary, knowing firmly that God

is with us, we are on the ground, we are steady.

Let's worship from a place of groundedness. Third one, we've got prayer, we've got worship. Third one, it's you.

It's me. It's community. Lean in to community. Galatians 6 verse 2 says, carry each other's burdens.

[18 : 43] What a beautiful picture. If everyone just turned to their left, and just held a little bit of the weight, of the person sitting next to them's burdens, it would lighten us all.

Carry each other's burdens. Choosing service to others, despite our own struggles. Who's been there? I'm not saying that sometimes we don't need to just stop, and rest, and say, enough, and pause.

And sometimes we're forced to do that. But who's been there on that day, where you're like, do you know what? I just want to choose, under the duvet today, thanks. I don't want to get up.

I don't want to serve you, Lord. I don't want to do what you've called me to do in this day. But you just hear that whisper from the Lord.

You can do it. Put one foot in front of the other. You can do it. And in that, God meets with us. He is faithful.

[19 : 46] He strengthens us through our service to others. Tim, I loved the time that we had. When I was working for Christchurch, Tim generously gave his time to mentor me.

We used to have many a breakfast. Always a nice croissant. Loved it. But I loved Tim's heart of a childlike attitude to God.

His Father God asking each day, what can I do today, Lord? What can I do today? I've never forgotten that. So we've got prayer, worship, one another, God's word.

Of course, leaning on his promises in difficult times strengthens our faithfulness to him. Romans 8, 28 reminds us that in all things, even what the enemy means for evil, in all things, he is working for the good of those who love him.

And in Romans 15, verse 4, it says, for everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the scriptures, all those people that have been through all these really hard times, that endurance, the encouragement they provide, gives us hope.

[21 : 09] So we've got prayer, worship, one another, community, God's word, and last, but of course, not least, the answer's always, Jesus.

Jesus! Fix our eyes on Jesus. He endured the ultimate challenge, the ultimate difficulty, abandoned on the cross.

When we look at the cross, we don't see Jesus, because on the cross, death was overcome. Three days later, we're going to head into Lent, we're going to head to Easter.

We are reminded of the power of resurrection, and the hope we have in him. If you're sitting here today, and you're thinking, what does that mean?

I would really encourage you to find someone to chat to afterwards, to find someone to be curious with. Come and pray. Don't go away with that feeling of, what does that mean?

[22 : 23] We're coming to the end. Back to my swim. After my swim, I would like to say, because I'd borrowed all of my kits, I'd borrowed a wetsuit, I'd borrowed a floaty thing.

After my swim, I bought my own floaty thing. Oh my goodness, I would not have got across the bay without a floaty thing. And I had a moment, and I brought my journal from last year, because I wrote up about my swim.

I really felt drawn to pray for it. I couldn't see through the waves. I had to navigate my way up and down.

I couldn't see the destination. I just had to keep going. And at one point, I turned onto my back.

When I turned onto my back, what I realised was that the float, that I'd been kind of swimming with behind me, the float started kind of bobbing along.

I was swimming back. Just do a little demonstration, just to wake everybody up. I was bobbing along, waves crashing over me, and my float was in front of me. And I had a really strong sense of Jesus being with me.

[23 : 40] Jesus was there. He was, I mean, we have different kind of verses, don't we? The anchor for our soul. I felt like I was anchored to this float. He was keeping me afloat, and we were going to get to the other side.

But of course, the kind of the air inside my float was like the Holy Spirit filling me, giving me all I needed. And then, I had the most wonderful moment.

I was still swimming backwards, paddling along, flailing. And I felt like Jesus was just whispering in my spirit, I'm with you.

But Kate, have you noticed what's behind the float? So by this point, it was 500 people in total. Most people are now at the beach, having a cup of coffee. I'm still going.

Family on the other side, wondering, where's Kate out there? In just a sea of orange floats. I looked at the orange float, and then I looked on the horizon.

[24 : 40] And on the horizon was the most enormous lifeboat. The swim was for the RNLI. There were all these little lifeboats around. There were all these canoeists.

Like, it was fine. It wasn't like I was doing some kind of huge, difficult thing where I was on my own. But there was this massive lifeboat. And of course, you're in the water, so it's even more massive. And it's moving closer, because they've shut the shipping lane. So I was thinking, the people on the boat are probably thinking, yeah, if you could just actually get on with it, last few people who, it's supposed to take half an hour.

We're now an hour and 20 minutes in. And they've shut the shipping lane. So of course, it was moving with us. And I just had such a strong sense in my spirit. That's my Father God.

He is there. There, Jesus is with me. And our Father God is just like bigger than anything we can even think or imagine. He is with us.

[25 : 37] He's got us. So we're going to come into land. And we're just going to have a little think in our spirits and ask Jesus ourselves.

What does he want us to notice this morning? The worship group are going to play a little bit of music to give us some space. For me, I'll just float these out with you.

I was thinking that faithfulness to God in the hard times builds in me resilience and character.

The writer of Hebrews reminds us of the opportunity to notice this, the discipline that sometimes God is bringing through difficult times. Not always.

But sometimes we have an opportunity to notice and learn. I think actually always we have the opportunity to notice and learn something. James 1 verse 2 to 4 says, Joy in trials produces perseverance.

[26 : 54] Which strengthens faith. So in our faithfulness we get our faith strengthened. Love that.

I think we get to go deeper into relationship with God if we can hang on in the hard times. In the hardest of times we often we feel stuck.

We're not sure where God is. But I think maybe this is when God can grow those deeper roots of faith. Get us attached to that anchor that is a hope for our soul.

And I think if we can hold on in the hard times and be faithful we can experience a peace that really does transcend our understanding.

Sometimes I think we're searching for a peace that just feels really comfortable. Last year at a very particular point that was difficult I knew my prayers my cries to God were God can you just calm this storm just bring some peace just bring some respite and I had a picture of this boat and it was on the sea and it was calm and it was just sitting there and I I was thinking that's the one God and then I felt a whisper in my spirit and God stirred me into thinking that boat's not going anywhere that boat is absolutely stuck.

[28 : 29] that boat needs the storm to move and it won't be easy it will be difficult but Jesus had that peace in the storms in the boat that peace that is ours to carry given freely by Jesus through the storms and Thank you.