

The Friend at Midnight

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: 10 August 2025

Preacher: Rev. Dr. Russell Herbert

- [0 : 0 0] Leslie Newbigin was a church leader, a Christian writer, a missionary, and one of the great theological voices of the 20th century.!
- That horizon is, for me, fundamental. And that's what makes it possible to be hopeful, and therefore to find life meaningful.
- That horizon of hope. Now, the reality may be that sometimes we might not always be feeling hopeful. Sometimes life can deal with all sorts of different experiences, or the way that we are as human beings, meaning we process things in different ways, and we might not always feel that energizing sense, maybe, of hopeful expectation.
- But perhaps particularly when we find ourselves in those moments, that's when we need to pull back to that horizon and be reminded afresh of that as the horizon within which we live.
- That horizon of Christ's promise that ultimately he will come again, that he will make all things new, and there will be no more suffering or pain. That we will live forever with him in a perfect world.
- [1 : 3 4] That is the horizon of hope that we need to be reminded of and reawakened to. That's the calling. That's the invitation.
- Sadly, tragically, most people in the world today do not live life with that horizon.
- In fact, the very opposite may be said. That perhaps there's maybe no sense of horizon at all, or if there is, it's a very bleak one. The thing is, is the horizon with which we live before us will shape the way in which we live our lives, and the way we think our way through life, and the way we make sense of things.
- And particularly when we struggle, it will shape the way we live and behave. Back in 1950, a very small American town, it was called Flagstaff, was flooded, intentionally.
- It was to make way for a new lake and a dam that was going to be constructed. And so this little town, the residents and businesses of that town have been told quite some way in advance that this was going to happen.
- [2 : 5 6] That it was a planned flooding of that town. Now, I'm not sure exactly how long it was between when that announcement was made and when the flooding actually took place.
- But there was this period of time between knowing that the town was just going to be intentionally flooded to create a lake, and it actually happening.
- And it was told that during that time, things changed in that town. That whereas previously there may have been projects to restore things, that there may have been renovations or repairs, nobody bothered.
- I mean, what was the point if you knew that you were going to have to vacate and everything was just going to be destroyed intentionally? And so through that time, buildings went to waste.
- The whole community had about it a sense of, well, what is the point? There was no improvement. There was no improvements made, no repairs.

[3 : 58] Gradually, the whole place became neglected and bedraggled. One resident said, where there is no faith in the future, there is no power in the present.

It seems difficult to believe, doesn't it? Living in a community, what it would be like to be in a community. Just imagine what it would be like knowing that it was the intention that that community would, and everything about it, all its physicality, its buildings, its shops, its schools, its homes, everything was going to be deliberately wiped out.

And when the time is ticking away, and that's the horizon that you have before you, well, it doesn't make for a particularly hopeful life. Sadly, tragically, that can be the world view that so many people will live with.

That this end, this life would, it would seem just, ends with just destruction, that eventually we decay, and life is no more. And we can perhaps try to sweep that reality under the carpet, or pretend that it won't exist, or just try hard not to think about it.

But if that's the world view that we have, there's no getting away from it. Ultimately, that will shape the way we live our lives. That is in complete and utter contrast with the horizon with which we are called to live with as Christians.

[5 : 25] But though there may be despair around us, and although there may be situations in our own particular lives that may cause us to squirm with anguish and with panic at times, we are called to come back over and over again every day to this promise that the horizon we have before us is a horizon with God's eternal future.

Now, that's not pie in the sky when you die. This is hope. This is hope. And this is what shapes the way we live our lives and face whatever realities come our way each day, now.

The horizon of Christ's promise. We're called to live in daily expectation that the kingdom of God is near. And so it is that Jesus shares this parable.

When he's talking about how we are to pray, but not just as a prayer, if we think of prayer just as like an isolated activity, like a bolt-on thing that you do, we've probably got the wrong idea of what prayer is.

There's more kind of a whole life approach, you know, how we approach all of life, how we navigate our way each day, knowing that we do so not on our own, but we do so with Jesus and with his spirit in us.

[6 : 46] So when Jesus is talking about prayer, he's not just talking about just slipping off to a quiet place and to engage in a religious activity. He's talking about a whole of life approach, how we see everything, everything.

Even when we hit the pillow and we go to sleep at night or try to go to sleep at night. That's what we're called to engage in, to know that we're not alone. That Christ is not only with you, but he's in you by his Holy Spirit.

And so when you think of it like that, when you live like that, then it makes all the difference. And Jesus gives us this parable to give us this idea of the sorts of expectation with which we are to embrace that.

And he says, he talks about, imagine that somebody, you know, comes and they haven't got any food, and so they bang on a friend's door in the middle of the night and call out, I need some food, can you give me some food, give me some supplies.

And he said, well, that friend actually won't want to go out and help them, even though they're a good friend. But because of their audacity, because they're being a pain in the neck, they'll go out and help.

[8 : 01] Now, let's be clear. This is what we call a contrast parable. Jesus is not saying God is like the reluctant friend, who goes out dragging his feet to help because he's annoyed in the middle of the night.

No, it's the very opposite. It's a contrast. You say, if somebody in that situation who gets out of bed in the middle of the night to help his friend, not because he wants to, but he feels, well, I've got to, I suppose.

If somebody in that situation will go to somebody's help, how much more so will God, who loves you, who made you, who created you, who wants you to have the very best in life, who wants you to live life to the full, such that he comes to us in Jesus and dies on the cross and is raised, the God who does all of that is in such contrast with a reluctant friend.

How much more so, therefore, is he poised to answer our prayers? So that's the horizon of expectancy and hope with which we are called to live.

So what does that mean in practical terms? I just want to suggest two things. Firstly, it means that we're called to be bold. And secondly, we're called to be brave. Firstly, what does it mean to be bold in this sense?

[9 : 19] Well, of course we need to be sensitive and cautious when we think about prayer here. The idea of, well, you name it and you claim it. We need to exercise sensitivity and caution around that, and I'll come to that in a moment.

But, and this is an important thing, there is no getting away from the fact that the thrust of Jesus' teaching is clear. When you pray, don't be afraid to ask.

Ask. Be direct. Be explicit. Live in a poise of expectation that God actually does want to answer your prayer, and that he will.

Name the things that are on your heart and mine before him, and don't be embarrassed or ashamed to do so. Be bold in your prayer.

Be bold in your expectation. Be bold in your hope. Now, this does, of course, involve a process of learning.

[10 : 21] You may have come across this before. It was presented, I think, by Bill Hybels a few years ago. Sometimes, when we ask God, God will simply say no. And the reason he will say no is that the request itself is not aligned with the will of God.

And that might be something that is difficult for us to come to terms with, but it may just be that the thing we're asking for is not good. It may not be good for us. It may not be good for God's wider purposes.

But the answer, difficult though it may be for us to come to terms with, may simply have to be no. It could be that we're just praying for the wrong kind of thing.

Lord, give me that Ferrari so I can do your work so much more quickly. But it may be that God is not saying no, but he's saying slow.

In other words, the timing is wrong. It's not the request is wrong, but the timing is wrong. That God has something that, yes, he will give a yes to that prayer, but right now, no, we've got to wait.

[11 : 25] And there are reasons that we may not be able to understand this side of eternity, but nevertheless, as we pray, God will answer that prayer, but just not yet. For reasons perhaps known just to God himself, but the timing is not right.

And I can think of times in my own life, and I dare say you can as well in your own lives, when there's been a sense that you look back and you think, actually, I'm glad God didn't do that, which I was asking him to do right then, but I can see now how he did it at a later stage.

Sometimes God doesn't say no, but he does say slow. Thirdly, there might be times when actually there's something in us that just needs to develop first before we are ready to receive that which we are praying for.

We need to develop. Something about us needs to calibrate with God, to calibrate with his desires.

It may be that we need to grow, we need to develop, that we need to put things right within our relationships. We may be praying for a particular blessing on our lives in a particular way, but we have first to put something right with a relationship with somebody else, and deal with some unfinished business.

[12 : 43] And it may be that God is saying to us, you've got to sort this out in your life, and in your lifestyle first. And do that. Do it not because I'm being unkind to you, but because I love you and I want the very best for you.

Again, remember the teaching of Jesus there in that parable. He says, which of you, you know, if a son asks for a fish, we'll give him a snake. It may well be that over a course of time, we just need to recalibrate, that we need to be in a place where the desires of our own hearts actually reflect the desires of the Father's heart.

And so sometimes the answer, therefore, may not be no, and it might not be slow, but it is grow. But, Bill Hybel said, you know, if the request is right, and if the timing is right, and if we're right, then God says go.

But the point is, is that with all of this, it's a process of discernment. But you won't know if God's answer is go, unless you ask him. And that's the point. So we should be bold in our prayers.

We should be direct and explicit. And there is nothing wrong with laying this before God, what is on our hearts. As long as we do so with that spirit of expectancy, combined with humility, with Lord, I recognise that this might not be the right timing now.

[14 : 15] I recognise that this might not be the right request, or there might be something that needs to be put right within my heart before what I'm praying for will come to be. But Lord, this is what's on my heart now, and I'm being honest with you, and I'm pouring it out before you.

It's knocking on that door. But if we don't knock, we shouldn't be surprised when it's not answered. So let's be bold in our prayers, because it is only when we ask that we can begin to learn what the heart of the Father might be for us.

And one thing I can say is this, that I do know, often I've found that people have said that when they have started talking to Jesus, when they've become a Christian, when they've given their life to him, and they begin to actually lay what is on their hearts before God in prayer, openly and honestly, life seems to strangely come together.

It doesn't necessarily all sort of, there's going to be problems and challenges as long as we're in this world. But it seems to be a strange set of coincidences, over and over again, that when people say that they begin to ask God to answer prayers, and they're honest with God in their prayers, that those coincidences that can either be falsified or verified, those coincidences seem to somehow stack up.

Let's be bold in our expectation as we live in the horizon of hope. But the second thing I would say is that this parable encourages us not only to be bold, but to be brave.

[16 : 02] You see, living in the horizon of Christ's promise does not immunise us from suffering, or problems, or difficulties, or challenges. And it would be misleading if we were to suggest otherwise.

And Jesus never said that the moment you follow him, everything will become hunky-dory. In fact, the very opposite. He said, expect it to be difficult. Take up your cross and follow me.

Living in the horizon of Christ's promise does not remove us, or immunise us, from the reality of death and dying. But it means that death is no longer seen as the ultimate reality, but rather something that we pass through.

Years ago, decades ago actually, there was a series of radio broadcasts called All Stations to the Cross. In one particular episode, there was a vicar, I can't remember his name, but he was being interviewed about his experience of dying.

He had a life-threatening disease, and he had been told that he had a very, very limited time left. And during the interview, he was asked, if you know this, why do you keep on going?

[17 : 27] Why are you still doing what you're able to do? Why are you in the studio today giving an interview when you know that you're going to die? Why don't you just kind of resign yourself to reality and just give up now?

His answer was fascinating. He said this, I could do that. But if I was to do it, it would be almost like going to a party and then refusing to take my coat off for the whole evening because I know that a taxi is coming at the end to take me home.

That's being brave. You see, living in hopeful expectation doesn't deny any realities of death or challenge or the things that are frankly part of life.

And Jesus never said that was the case. But that doesn't remove the sense of expectation that defines what Christian hope is. I'm going to pray in just a moment but I just want to share one last image with you.

And it comes from Cardinal Raniero Cantalameta, I think it's pronounced. He's a Catholic priest. And he once said that faith and hope and love which I talked about in the New Testament as those three classic Christian virtues.

[18 : 56] Faith, hope and love he said might be understood as three sisters. Faith, hope and love. He said two of them are grown up but hope is the child in the middle.

And if you can imagine faith, hope and love with hope as the child in the middle and they're walking along and this little child is holding the hands of the other two sisters. And as they're walking along so the child is so much smaller, smaller legs, can't keep up with the other two but they're sort of swinging.

Yeah? You often see this, don't you? You see two grown ups with a child in between and they're walking along and they walk along one, two, three, whee! And they're always like leave the ground as the legs are sort of doing this running in mid air and then they land again.

And so this whole thing of like swinging along in between the two grown ups. Hope is like that, he said. But he said the thing is is that at face value it would seem that it's the two grown ups that are carrying, that are swinging the child.

But that's not what's happening. Such is the sense of youthful energy, the sense of childlike wonder, the sense of excitement the sense of joy and wonder of being alive and just wanting to fly again.

[20 : 18] It's that in hope which actually pulls faith and love those other two sisters behind. Living in the horizon of Christ's promises, living like the kingdom is near.

So we come to pray now. let's pray that we may be re-energised in that hope and encounter again the joy of hope swinging before us and pulling us forward.

Let's pray. As we come to pray, we're aware that praying, well, although we are united in the same thing, we're praying to praying to Jesus, praying in the Holy Spirit, each of us is a different person with a different life and a different set of circumstances and so we bring something different in prayer and so I just want to give space for that right now.

so just in the moment of stillness, I invite you just to bring your own heart, your own mind and your own circumstances in life before God right now.

As you hold that before God, the stillness of this moment, bring whatever is on your heart and mind.

[22 : 07] Whatever hopes, whatever dreams, whatever sense of concern you might have right now, whatever you're going through, just bring it before him and lay it before him.

Lord Jesus, thank you that you teach us to be bold. thank you that you call us to, you invite us to live in a horizon of expectation for that sense of promise that knock and the door will be opened, ask and we shall receive.

Lord, in our humanity, sometimes there are things we ask for, the timing or where we're at that might not align with your purposes right there, but thank you that you still say, ask anyway.

So Lord, as we ask you, we pray that you would give us wisdom, insight and maturity, that you would eventually shape the desires of our hearts around your will and purposes. Lord, right now, we bring you those things that are on our hearts and we ask you to meet us in that place to minister in the power and the peace and the joy of your Holy Spirit.

Lord, you also call us to be brave. There will be some situations that we can't change, but Lord, you call us to live expectantly, knowing that the horizon before us is one of a hopeful future.

[24 : 06] So even where we find it so hard to see beyond the clouds, help us to do so. Help us to trust in you.

May that light of hope burn through the mist that we may lay hold of you and your presence in hope and in expectation now.

now. Holy Spirit, continue to move among us, guide us and direct our paths now and in this coming week.

In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen.