

The Open Hands of God

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[0 : 0 0] We're part of a kind of sermon series at the moment where we're looking at God providing abundantly and kind of what we do with that, about stewardship and what we do with what God's got.

And today we're going to think about the aspect of what we have got from God. So it's the open hands of God and what we can do in response. But if you cast your minds back to Christmas, I wonder if any of you played this game where you had a huge bar of dairy milk in the middle.

Everyone sat around in a circle, big bar of dairy milk. A knife and a fork. Yeah, stupid game, isn't it? A woolly hat, scarves and gloves. And you have to throw a six.

Some of you are going, yeah, yeah. Some of you are going, no, what are you on about? Well, I'll tell you what this game is. You throw a six, hopefully. You turn the dice. As soon as you've got a six, you've got to get the hat on, the scarf on, the gloves on.

You get the cutlery and then you start kind of trying to get into this stupid bar of chocolate. I used to hate that game. Can you tell that it was one of those things that I passionately detested about Christmas?

[1 : 0 5] Because I never got any chocolate. Ever. It's worse than that, guys. Come on, it's worse than that. Yeah, never. And it was always the person next to me who was better at dexterity and skill and panache at getting into that bar of chocolate.

And I used to get really, really annoyed. Sharing is really difficult, isn't it? Those of us with children might kind of recognise how difficult it is to teach people to share.

And I was thinking about that and I was thinking, actually, I can understand sometimes why my little lad gets annoyed when he has to share something. Because just imagine that after this service you're having your cup of coffee or not and you're enjoying it and someone comes up to you and says, do you mind if I just enjoy a little bit of your coffee?

That looks really good. Well, why not? We teach people to share, don't we? Or we're driving in our car, we stop at the traffic lights and someone taps on the window and says, do you mind if I share your car?

Can I jump in? Can you move across? Can I have a go? Can I have a go? These are far-fetched examples. But as people, we are clingers. We cling on to things.

[2 : 1 3] You know, when we're younger and we're learning to cycle on a bike, we might cling on to those handlebars. When we leave school, we might cling on to whatever qualifications or not, or reputation or not we have, we might cling on to that.

Whenever we start our career or whatever it is we do, we might cling on to that first rung of the career ladder. As we go through life, we find ourselves clutching tightly onto things.

How opposite is that of God? How far-fetched can we get away from compared to what God is like? Could we be any further apart from the generosity that God shows us?

So this morning, the question that I want to ask us is, what is God wanting you to share in? What is God wanting you to share in?

So let's think about how generous God is to ask. And we go straight back to the beginning of the Bible, Genesis 3. And to put this in context about how generous God has been, in Genesis 1 and 2, we've seen God make the world.

[3 : 21] We're not going to go into the theology of that, mainly because I don't understand it. But God has made everything. And he has said, it is good. That's generous enough, isn't it? That God shares his creation with us.

And he puts man and women in the garden. And he says, they are very good. That's generous enough. And then in Genesis 3, we see Adam and Eve kind of screwing things up on quite a big scale, really.

Going against the only thing that God, in his love, has asked them not to do. He says, you can eat from any fruit. You can enjoy any tree. But not that one. And Adam and Eve, of course, go to that one and do what God has asked them not to do.

They've made that choice. They've tried to blame each other. Adam also tries to blame God for putting the woman in the garden, which I think is very far-fetched indeed. They hide in the bushes, trying to hide from God.

And in the end, they come out, probably slightly red-faced from the trees, and say, okay, yeah, we screwed up, Lord. And amidst God's grief at their choice to disobey him, this is what he does in Genesis 3, verse 21.

[4 : 30] The Lord God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them. It's just a small sentence in the middle of this huge story of humankind messing things up.

And it's easy to overlook. But this shows how generous God is. They've already got clothing that they've made for themselves. But God thinks that's not good enough for the people that I've made.

And he clothed them in garments. And also, that word clothed that we see is never seen again, that particular version of the word clothed. It's only ever seen, again, in the Old Testament when we think of the temple and the intimacy of people worshipping God in the temple.

That word is used again when we think about the garments that the priests wore in the Old Testament. It signified honour. It signified glory. It signified intimacy with God.

Here is the Lord God, in the midst of his upset and anger, being generous. This is a God being lavish. We see abundant hands elsewhere as well.

[5 : 30] If we fast forward to John 21. And to put this in context, Jesus has just been crucified. He's been abandoned by his family and friends. He's been tortured by the soldiers.

He's gone to the cross. And he's risen from the dead. And after all that, he goes out to find his disciples. Those people that left him in his hour of need.

And what did he do? He rustles up a bit of a barbecue. John 21. He's on the beach with his homies. Making a barbecue. Getting the fish. Grilling it.

What a sign of friendship. When we share food with someone, generally it means that we get on with them. And we want to spend time with them. We want to invest in a relationship with them.

But again, there's even more. In John 21, towards the end of the chapter, he talks to Peter. Peter. And Peter is the disciple. Some of you might recall, kind of before Jesus' crucifixion, Peter is skulking around the house trying to see what's going on.

[6 : 35] And people come up to him and go, I recognise your accent. You're from Galilee. Are you with that Jesus guy? And he goes, no. No, I wasn't with him. And this happens three times.

Peter, three times, says, no, I don't know who Jesus is. I would imagine when Jesus goes up to Peter, Peter must have been feeling pretty low.

When they got eye contact, Peter must have thought, I've really made a mistake. What does Jesus do? Jesus asks Peter a simple question three times.

He says, do you love me more than these? Do you love me more than these? He asks him that three times. And we might think, okay, you're making a point here, Jesus.

Three times. You could have asked it once and he's given you the answer. But I think Jesus asked him three times, almost to cancel out the three times that Peter denied Jesus.

[7 : 34] What an amazing God we worship. A God who goes above and beyond to affirm us. A God who goes above and beyond to remind us that our sins are washed away.

That God doesn't dwell in past mistakes. 1 John 1.9 says, if we're faithful, sorry, if we confess our sins, God is faithful to forgive us.

And in our psalm today, we read of the same God generosity. A God who is open-handed with forgiveness. So this morning, if you're feeling a bit like Simon Peter, if you're feeling that you can't really look Jesus in the eye this morning because you've screwed up one too many times, the truth is that's a word that I was about to say that I'm not allowed to say in a church.

But it's not true. It's really not true. We have a God who is open-handedly generous with his forgiveness. And actually, when we start telling us that we've gone one step too far to be forgiven by Jesus, that's a lie straight from the enemy.

It's just not true. God is open-handed with his forgiveness. He's generous in meeting our spiritual needs. But it doesn't stop there. We're going to think today as well, from our psalm, how he meets our...

[8 : 53] He's open-handed with his provision. How he meets physical needs as well. And I'm reading from Psalms. I think Psalms is a bit of a funny book. I think it's almost like we're having a little nosy in David's prayer diary.

Sometimes I read these psalms and I think, what, okay, yeah, it's scripture and it's great, but I don't get what you're on about, to be honest. It takes us through the ups and the downs of the Christian life.

In some traditions, they say a psalm or two every single day. And they go through the ups and downs of being really close to God and life being great. And then, you know, life being really rubbish and all the rich people getting all the money.

And Lord, why don't you kill them all? I'm really angry at the moment. It gives us an honest insight into times when we're just wrestling with God. It's honest.

It's gritty. This one, Psalm 65, I think must have been written when David was having a bit of a good day. It's full of rejoicing, isn't it? Like, Lord, you're great.

[9 : 51] You've done this. You've done that. You've provided me with this. My grain is overflowing. It's a good day for David. So we read of two things in this psalm.

Firstly, forgiveness. We've already thought about that. And in the second half of the psalm, or the kind of last two thirds, we think about God's provision. How he gives us things that we need.

Of how God cares for the land. He waters it. He fills the streams. He provides us with grain. In comparison to me, not wanting to share my little chocolate bar, God is the opposite.

If God was playing that game, he'd be straight in there and giving the chocolate to everyone else, wouldn't he? He's a God of abundant provision. When we look at this psalm, we think it might have been written for the equivalent of the Jewish harvest festival.

So they didn't have a harvest festival like we sometimes celebrate. But there were three main festivals in the Jewish calendar. The festival of Passover, or Weeks, or Tabernacles. Three different ones.

[10 : 53] And we think maybe the psalm was written for one of them. We're not quite sure. But that would make sense. Because it's a time when we're celebrating how good God is. But a bit of a history lesson, if I might kind of go down that tangent.

And it is relevant. That if we look at this psalm in a bit more detail, we see part of it in Isaiah 37. You'll have to believe me, because I didn't put it on the screen, I don't think.

But when you get home, plough through Isaiah 37, a bit of light reading. And you'll see snippets, word for word, from this psalm. Which makes us think that we can maybe put this in a specific time in history.

Which was around 700 years before Jesus. 701 BC. And there was a huge assault going on by the Assyrians on Jerusalem. The people of God were under massive attack.

And you can imagine when sieges were going on, or when battles were going on, it would be hard to get your food. It would be hard to get provisions in. The enemy might block up the streams or put stuff in it, so you can't get your water.

[11 : 58] Maybe that's what's happened in Clevedon. Maybe those Bristolians have done something to the water supply. I don't know. I haven't done anything, I promise. It wasn't me. So back then, battle was bad enough.

But you couldn't get your provisions in either. Well, thanks for the history lesson, David. I hear you saying that's very interesting, but so what? Well, when we put this psalm into that context, I think it gives us a bit of a deeper insight, actually.

The assurance that when we feel the invaders are coming, when we feel either spiritually we're under attack, or just life is getting us down a bit, God is abundant with his provision.

That when we feel that our basics of food and water, or whatever it is that is the basic of our life, whatever building blocks we have at the bottom of our life, when we feel that's under attack, this psalm reminds me that God's provision is enough.

God's provision is enough. So we're seeing that God provides for us spiritually. He's abundant with his forgiveness to us. And now we've got the sense that as well as that, God enjoys providing nourishment for us.

[13 : 10] He provides our needs. He's the God of the harvest, the God of provision. But a word of warning here as well, unless we go too far with this God gives us everything we need thing, there's a bit of a teaching going on in some parts of the church which can be a bit dangerous, called, well I think, called the prosperity gospel.

And this basically takes this a step too far, I think. And it says that God wants you to have the best clothes. God wants you to have the biggest house.

God wants you to have that promotion at work. You can almost see me on television with the donate here, can't you, going underneath here. God wants you to have the better job. God wants you to have a beautiful face with shiny white teeth.

Well, and all you have to do is believe hard enough and you'll get it. Or say the right words in faith and you'll get it. I don't think that's what I understand scripture to say.

Yes, God provides us with what we need because he's a loving God. He's always faithful. He faithfully shares the harvest with us. But I don't think that means he always wants us to have the best clothes.

[14 : 21] Or the biggest house. Or the poshest homes in the neighbourhood. Because there's something else that God invites us to share in as well. And it's something that I don't really want to share in.

The Holy Spirit was really challenging me when I was thinking about this talk. But the scripture clearly says that he wants us to share in suffering as well. Romans 8, 17.

Actually, if I can go back a sentence. I don't think the Lord wants us to share in suffering. That's a whole different sermon series. But I think there's a sense that as we walk with the Lord, stuff will happen that isn't good.

And for some reason, God allows it to happen. Romans 8, 17. This is Paul writing to the church in Rome. If we are children, then we are co-heirs with Christ.

If indeed we share his suffering. In order that we might share his glory. Yes, the Lord shares his glory with us. But what is glory?

[15 : 23] It's not glory that the world sees as being glorious. God's glory is two hands nailed to a cross. God's glory is the God that made the world humbling himself to be a servant for us.

Earlier we saw how the Lord shares forgiveness with us. That forgiveness is only possible through the death of Jesus on the cross. And sometimes our walk with him, our path will lead us into situations where we share in his suffering.

I think that's a better way of looking at it. The Lord doesn't want us to suffer. The Lord allows us to share in that suffering. And I know from conversations I've had with some of you guys over the last week, that's quite real, isn't it?

It's quite gritty. It's quite real. We might know what it's like to be abandoned by family or betrayed by friends. So does he.

When we know what it's like to be in pain, be on measure, or we're tempted to despair, so does Jesus. When we're so close to giving up that we're almost weeping drops of blood, we can take comfort from our God who is in Gethsemane saying, please Lord, I don't want to go through this.

[16 : 37] Your will be done, but I'd really rather not. There are currently 20 million believers across 50 countries who risk their lives daily for Jesus, who know what it means to share in suffering.

3,000 Christians in the last six months or so across the world have been killed for their faith, sharing in the death of Jesus Christ. It's not a comfortable message, I'm afraid, this bit.

If I was going to write this in a psalm, it wouldn't probably sound like the good day that David was having. And it's a huge challenge for me personally to be able to say, as Paul did in his letter to Philippians, yeah, I want to know Christ.

That bit's easy, isn't it? Yeah, I want to know Jesus. And then Paul writes, almost without a comma, I want to know the power of his resurrection. Yeah, that sounds good. I like that bit too. And then he says, and I want to participate in his sufferings.

I want to participate in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death. Oh, not sure I want that bit actually, Lord.

[17 : 41] Can I come back to you on that? And there's a challenge for me, my friends, this morning. Am I willing to embrace the suffering of Christ, that I might also embrace the power of his resurrection?

I know that I'm someone, that as soon as someone mentions they've got a poorly elbow, or a bit of a headache, I'm straight in there. Let's pray, let's pray. Come on, let's see what God can do. I know that I'm someone who's quick to see the delivering power of the Lord Jesus Christ.

But I'm probably, if I'm honest, not as quick to embrace his loneliness, or his despair, or his helplessness. As I said, I'm not saying that the Lord loves it when we are lonely, or when we suffer.

But I don't think he allows us to have perfect, shiny lives either. And this morning, it's a strange encouragement for you, but this morning, if you are one of those in the valley, if you're one of those who are so close to despair, or one of those really close to giving up, be encouraged that the Lord Jesus is there sharing with you.

He's sharing the valley with you. He's sharing the suffering with you. He walks alongside you in the valley. He's generous in his love to you this morning.

[18 : 58] He's generous to share his grace, and he's generous to share his time with you. His spirit is here in this place. But this morning, we've thought about he's open-handed with his forgiveness.

And I want to reiterate this morning, if you feel that actually maybe you're one step too far from the Lord Jesus Christ, that's not true. And this morning might be an opportunity for you to give your life to Jesus Christ for the first time, or maybe to have a mark in the sand and say, actually, you know what?

I've been walking with you for a while. I've been struggling. Yeah. Let's try and do this again. We worship a God who's open-handed with his provision. And he's open-handed with his suffering.

And I go back to my first question. What is God wanting you? What is God wanting me to share in this morning? Maybe he's encouraging you that his generous grace is in us.

Maybe he's encouraging you not to worry. Don't worry. He will provide all you need. Or maybe, like me, he's challenging you.

[20 : 08] If you want to see my glory, he says, maybe you have to know what it means to share in suffering sometimes too. Maybe he's encouraging you as you struggle in the valley that he's good and that he shares with you and knows what you're going through.

You're laughing. I mean, it's hard to see if you are now that sometimes you're willing to make I try to think. To engage him in the valley, and I have to