Faith Path

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Preacher: Dave Hall

[0:00] I'll just make sure that mic's turned on or James will be shouting at me.! Yeah, the light's lit up. Put my glasses on so I can see.

! I trust you've all had a good week. It's lovely to be here as always. I love speaking at our church. Somewhere I always feel comfortable speaking. But you're never quite sure whether you've got the right message.
And you always, I don't know what you're like in life. I'm one of those characters that's always looking for affirmation, for confirmation that you've got the right thing or you've done the right thing. Well, the first two hymns, I've ever stood there this morning singing.
There were two lines and I've written them down as I was stood there. Sorrow's path, I off may tread was in the first one. And then on the road, not understood was in the second one. And at that point, I knew that's okay. What I've got ties in with, this is clearly what God wants me to speak about today.
So I'm hoping what I've got to speak about this morning is encouraging and challenging to each of you, as it has been for me this week, just looking at the subject. And I want to start by talking about something that might seem like a strange thing to sort of start with.
[1:13] Quite unusual subject for a family service. Your career path. Your career path. Now, depending on your age or where you are in life, that might mean very different things to people.

You may be at university, you may be at college, you may be thinking about what you want to do in your career. Others are working, some are looking for work, others are raising family and others might be enjoying retirement.
Some people have spent their whole lives working, doing the same thing. Others have had several different careers in different fields. And I suppose we often imagine that a career path as something fairly straightforward.
You might start here, you work hard, you make progress and eventually you end up somewhere over there. But life doesn't always work like that, does it?
And this week, actually just a bit of background to why I ended up on this subject. Both me and Emma work from home. Emma works occasionally in London.
[2:19] Only occasionally. And I work, Emma's got an office upstairs and I've got an office outside. But one of the responsibilities I have all during, well, I'd say all during the week, like all of our lives really.

I met coffee. We invested in quite a lovely coffee machine recently. And Emma's convinced herself that she can't operate it. So now I have full time responsibility for making coffee.
But I met coffee for us at different times during the day. And earlier this week, I went to make coffee. I went to take Emma, her coffee up in her office. And she was still on a call that had overrun. And I would stand outside the door and just sort of listen to what's the conversation that's going off. Because that's the kind of guy I am. And I got a coffee in my hand and I didn't want to go back downstairs. So I was listening to this conversation between Emma and the guy she was talking to. And he used this phrase, talking about himself, that he had a squiggly career. A squiggly career. And I thought that's a strange word to use, but a squiggly career.
[3:17] So when the accord ended, I went in with Emma's coffee and I said, what did he mean by that? He says, well, he hasn't always worked for the NHS. He's worked here. He's worked there. He's done this.

He's done that. It's not been a particularly straight path to where he found himself. So he's had a bit of a squiggly career. And essentially the idea is that our careers don't always follow a nice straight line.

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There are unexpected turns, different opportunities, and things don't often quite work out the way we imagine, do they? Sometimes we head in one direction and then we find ourselves going in a completely opposite way.
And as I thought about that, I began to think, I forgot to turn that on. But we had to think about something else. Not our career paths, but our faith path.
Our journey with God. And I wonder if this morning you were to draw a picture of your journey with God, what it would look like.
[4:24] Would it be a nice straight line? Or would it look a little bit more of a squiggly one? Perhaps there have been times when you felt really close to God.

Or perhaps there have been other times when you've really struggled. Times when you've, things haven't quite worked out how you hoped they would. Times when you've stumbled. Times when you've lost your focus.
And perhaps even wandered away from God. And if that's you this morning, I want you to know something. You're not on your own.
You're not on your own. A few years ago here at Dale Street, this is pre-COVID. I love how we refer to that now. Everything's like sort of pre-COVID or...
We spent some time working our way through the Psalms and that went into COVID, didn't it? Because we started doing, sharing some of them on our church online. And I remember as we worked our way through the Psalms, we stumbled across some lovely passages of Scripture.
[5:27] I think we've, none of some of us were reading for the first time. Others were reading repetitively. We stumbled across, I would describe them as some real nuggets of truth.

As we went through them. And there was one in particular that I underlined at the time when we got to Psalm 37. And I'm just going to read the two verses in Psalm 37. And it's Psalm 37 verses 23 and 24.
And it just says this, The Lord directs the steps of the godly. He delights in every detail of their lives. Though they stumble, they will never fall.
For the Lord holds them by the hand. The Lord holds them by the hand. I love the picture that that verse gives us.
God directing our steps. God taking delight in our journey with Him. And then that wonderful promise that when we stumble, He holds us by His hand.
[6:36] God. And there's something lovely about the wording that is used there that stands out to me. Because the verse doesn't say, If we stumble. It says, Though we stumble.

And I think that's significant because the reality is that we're human. We're not perfect. And there will be times when things go wrong.
Times when we make poor decisions. Times when our faith path looks anything but straight.
Now, it would be really easy, wouldn't it? I thought to myself, looking at that verse, to use that as a bit of a loophole. Perhaps, and think to yourselves, Well, I could wander off and sort of stay off the straight and narrow, so to speak.
And not perhaps keep that straight path, because it's okay, because God will catch me. And He'll bring me back. And He's always holding my hand, so it doesn't really matter. But that's not the invitation of what that verse is saying.
[7:41] God calls us to follow Him faithfully. And we'll come back to that bit later. But it's a wonderful reminder that our failure, our failures are not the end of our journey with Him.

The Bible is full of characters who failed God. Characters who you think to yourself, These are icons of the Bible.
And their path was not straight. Look at the Apostle Paul. His path wasn't a straight line journey.
One of my favorite characters in the Bible, David. His path was anything but straight. Think about the mistakes he made. He was God's chosen one. He was the God's King.
And the mistakes he made. Peter, the disciple, another of my favorite characters. Nothing but a wonky, curvy path he led. We're in good company.
[8:47] If you think to yourself, my path is not straight. But I want us to turn to Luke chapter 24. So if you've got your Bibles or your tablets or Luke chapter 24, I'm going to jump in and out a little bit.

And this is not a passage I don't think I've ever spoke on before. Because I checked. Luke chapter 24, verse 13.

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And this is the account of two followers of Jesus, two disciples, traveling from Jerusalem to a village called Emmaus. And to understand what's happening, probably really need to remember where we are in the story.
Jesus has been crucified and the disciples have seen the one who they believed to be the Messiah. They saw him arrested, condemned and put to death.
Their world had been turned upside down. And now on the third day, there are reports that his tomb is empty. And these two disciples are struggling to make sense of that.
[9:48] And we pick up the account in verse 13. The first couple of verses, it says this. That same day, two of Jesus' followers were walking from the village of Emmaus, seven miles from Jerusalem.

As they walked along, they were talking about everything that had happened. As they talked and discussed these things, Jesus himself suddenly came and began walking with them.
But God kept them from recognizing him. So here are these two followers of Jesus, disciples, walking along the road discussing everything that's happened.
And Jesus himself comes alongside them. But they don't recognize him. Now Luke tells us that they were kept from recognizing Jesus.
And there's something I find particularly encouraging about this account. These disciples were confused. They were disappointed.
[10:53] They didn't understand what had happened. But Jesus comes alongside them. He doesn't wait until they've worked it all out.

He meets them right there on the road in the middle of their uncertainty. And sometimes, just like those two disciples, we might not even recognize that Jesus is even there with us.
Read a bit further on. Verse 17. He asked them, What are you discussing so intently as you walk along? They stopped short.
Sadness written across their faces. Then one of them, Cleopas, replied, You must be the only person in Jerusalem who hasn't heard about all the things that have happened these last few days.
What things?
Jesus asked. The things that happened to Jesus. The man from Nazareth, they said. He was a prophet who did powerful miracles. And he was a mighty teacher in the eyes of God and all the people.
[11:56] But our leading priests and other religious leaders handed him over to be condemned to death. And they crucified him. We had hoped that he was the Messiah who would come to rescue Israel.

This all happened three days ago. There's a particular moment in that passage that made me just stop as I read it.
In verse 21, the disciples say three words that I think says a lot, an awful lot about how they were feeling. Verse 21 starts, We had hoped.
We had hoped. Just three words. But that says so much. Because the disciples, they had expectations.
They believed that things were going to turn out very differently. And now from their perspective, all their hopes appear to have disappeared.
[13:00] I wonder whether anybody here this morning can relate to that. Perhaps there have been times when you felt yourself saying something similar. I'd hoped things would have worked out differently.

I'd hoped that that prayer would be answered in a particular way that I wanted. I'd hoped that that situation would change. And sometimes when life doesn't go the way we expect it, it can affect our walk with God.
We become discouraged. We lose our focus. And we begin to question things, don't we? How much if you've never ever questioned how things are going?
Why is God sending me down this path? Why is this happening? And perhaps our faith path starts to look a little less straight than we imagined.
But here's the wonderful thing about this account. While these disciples are talking about the hope they believed they'd lost, the risen Jesus is walking right beside them.
[14:09] They don't realise it. They can't see it yet. But their hope isn't gone. Jesus is alive and he's right there with them.

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Now as we continue this account, something quite remarkable happens. Jesus begins explaining scriptures to these two disciples. He helps them understand how everything that happens fits into God's plan.
And I want us to read a little further because I think this is important. Verses 25 through 27, it says this, Then Jesus said to them, You foolish people, you find it so hard to believe all that the prophets wrote in the scriptures.
Wasn't it clearly predicted that the Messiah would suffer all these things before entering his glory? Then Jesus took them through the writings of Moses and all the prophets, explaining from all the scriptures the things concerning himself.
Jesus is showing them here that his suffering and death weren't some kind of terrible accident. They were part of God's plan.
[15:21] And eventually when they reach Emmaus, they invite him to stay with them and they sit down to eat. And as Jesus takes the bread, he blesses it and breaks it.

And something extraordinary happens. Their eyes are opened. And they recognize him. It's Jesus. The one who they thought had lost is alive. And then he suddenly disappears from their sight.
Let's read what happens there. It says this, verse 28. By this time they were nearing Emmaus. By the end of their journey, Jesus acted as if he were going on. But they begged him, stay the night with us since it is getting late.
So he went home with them. As they sat down to eat, he took bread and blessed it. Then he broke it and gave it to them. Suddenly their eyes were opened and they recognized him. And at that moment he disappeared.
They said to each other, Didn't our hearts burn within us as he talked to us on the road and explained the scriptures to us? And within the hour, they were on their way back to Jerusalem.
[16:28] There they found the eleven disciples and the others who had gathered with them. I love what happened there. What happened in this story.

These two disciples have walked all the way from Jerusalem to Emmaus, seven miles. And now they get up and they head straight back to Jerusalem.
Think about that. At the beginning of the account, they are walking away from Jerusalem, confused and disappointed. By the end, they're traveling back along the same road, but in the opposite direction.
What changed? What changed? What changed? Well, they've encountered the risen Jesus. And that changes everything.
The events of the crucifixion haven't been undone. But they now understand that Jesus' death wasn't the end of the story. And I think that's a lovely picture for us this morning.
[17:42] Sometimes what we need isn't simply a change in our circumstances. Sometimes we just need to see Jesus more clearly. To recognize his presence.

To know that he is with us. To listen to his word. And to allow him to change our understanding of the road that we're on. And the road that we're traveling. Because our faith path might not always be straight.
There will be bends, hills, stumbling blocks. But we need to allow him to help us understand the journey that we're on.
There may be times when we find ourselves heading in completely the wrong direction. But the wonderful invitation of God's grace is that we can turn to him.
And through Jesus we can find forgiveness. Restoration and a way forward. Back on the path. We've talked about our faith path.
[18:49] About the times we stumble. About the times we lose our focus. And perhaps the times we even wander away from God. I like to be dead honest.

And I'm going to ask you guys to be really honest. Put your hands up if you've always felt 100% close to God. If you've never, ever, ever felt like there's a bit of distance between you and him. I don't want us to think that because God is gracious it sometimes doesn't matter how we live. Because it does. God calls us to follow him. To live lives that please him. And the reality is none of us get it right all the time.
And that's something I really want us to understand. God's grace isn't an excuse for us to wander away from him. It's an invitation to come back to him.

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And there's another passage I just want to quickly share. And it's just a couple of verses in Hebrews chapter 4. It says this. So then, since we have a high priest who has entered heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to what we believe.
[20:03] This high priest of ours understands our weaknesses. For he faces all of the same testings we do, yet did not sin. So let us come boldly to the throne of our gracious God.

There we will receive his mercy and will find grace to help us when we need it most. Those verses are amazing, aren't they?
To think that we have a saviour who understands our weaknesses. And rather than telling us to stay away because we've failed, we're invited to come to him, to receive mercy, to find grace.
Perhaps there's somebody here this morning who is struggling. Perhaps your faith path hasn't been particularly straightforward recently.
Perhaps you've stumbled. Perhaps you've found yourself further away from God than you'd like to be. Well, the invitation is there. Come back to him. Not because what we've done doesn't matter.
[21:12] But because what Jesus has done for us. The most important thing I want to share this morning is this. You see, those two disciples on the road to Emmaus thought that Jesus' death was the end of everything they'd hoped for.

They were down in the dumps. They were disillusioned. They were leaving Jerusalem where this, in their minds, catastrophe had happened. But what they hadn't understood was that the death of Jesus was God's wonderful plan of salvation.
Jesus went to the cross for you and for me. He took the punishment for our sins.
That never fails to make me feel that small. But also that important that when Jesus hung on that cross, it was for Dave Hall who lives in a little village called Royston.
And three days later, he rose again. And because of that, we can know forgiveness. And we can be made right with God. Not because we've lived perfect lives.
[22:30] Not because we've managed to keep our faith path perfectly straight. But because Jesus, God's only son, did what he did for us.

Jesus said to his disciples in John 14 verse 6, I am the way, the truth and the life. No man can come to the Father except through me. Perhaps you're here this morning.
And you've never put your trust in Jesus. Perhaps you've never really thought about what it means to have a relationship with God. Well, that invitation is for you.
Jesus died and rose again so that you might be forgiven. And begin a new life following him. And for those of us who already know him, perhaps this morning is an opportunity to look honestly at our own lives.
To ask whether or not we've become distracted. Whether we've wondered. Whether there are things we need to put right with God. Just take us back as a close to where we begin this morning.
[23:39] With that picture of our faith path. If you could draw your journey with God. What would it look like?

Perhaps it's been fairly straight. Perhaps it's been full of bends. And unexpected turns. Perhaps there's been times when you've stumbled and fallen.
But here's what I want you to remember. Our hope isn't found in how perfectly we've walked with him. Our hope is found in Jesus.
The one who died for us. The one who rose again. The one who offers us forgiveness and a new life. The one and only who by his grace helps us back to our feet when we stumble.
So wherever you find yourself on the path this morning. Don't lose sight of him.
[24:43] Keep your eyes fixed on Jesus. And remember those wonderful words of Psalm 37. Though we stumble. The Lord holds us by the hand.

Amen. Shall we just pray? Please may

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