

Faithfulness

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[0 : 0 0] Before I begin, I would, at a time of living like this, and having been here for two years, which is sufficiently long, even if I'm transient among you, to grow to them and to have cherished my technology.

It's an opportunity I welcome, just to say thank you to many, many people who have welcomed me here, and to have made my two years just so enriching, to members of my pastoral area group, to members of the prayer and intercession group, to lay assistants, to Harry and to Archie and to others.

I would just like to say a warm thank you. I will remember St. John's with great affection in my time in Gelfast, where I come back, and I'll have remains to be seen.

But certainly I look forward to it at some time in the future. So as we turn to God's work now, maybe let's bow our heads and pray together. Father, there is nothing that we covet more in turning to the study of thy word than the blessed presence of your Holy Spirit among us.

May he enlighten our minds. May he warm our hearts and instruct us in the way that we should live. We ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen.

[1 : 3 7] Amen. He sat there, beneath the gaunt, flickering light of a Gatland, sullen and quivering.

Wet, sleety snow stung the air, driven by all that was cool in a late November gale. only in the sheltered crevices of the cobbled street did the snowflakes remain elsewhere they melted hurriedly and miserably as if to escape the pain of that early winter's night and he began to whimper and moan in a moving melancholy harmony with the wailing of the wind occasionally he moved his head out from the darkest of the shadows his matted hair clinging round his eyes and dripping with all the foulness of the cobbled gutter more often he withdrew even more from what pale light there was as a horse and carriage clattered over the cobbles or a drunk lunged through the gloom spitting, cursing and kicking his way home it was oh so grimly cold that night and death herself was stopping the streets no doubt looking for a feast but happy enough with morsels such as him he startled but this time it was to a different sound the noise contained no hurry no threat the plod of an old gentleman unusually out at such an hour but undaunted by all the coarseness of that night's weather echoed down the alley his approach was slow and steady and for that reason seemed already kind and gentle mechtly he cried when he saw him cowering and so bedraggled it's nae a night to be oot and look at ye if ye deed there'd be nothing to rot and with that he reached down a firm and kindly advance to offer some bread from a poke in his pocket the whimpering turned to a growl and his lips curled resentfully as the gracious hand approached but the lure of food and the calm of McNiven when all around was howling and frenzied and raw overcame his fears at last hesitantly he nibbled from the outstretched hand and from low between his legs he managed to wag his tail ye'd as well come with me said McNiven offering him some more bread and then rising away the dog followed with his eyes but shivered and stuck fast as fearful as he was frozen the old man moved off out from relative shelter to the gusty swirling air are you coming?

he cried and the dog crept out low and unsure but just a little more certain with every step he took for the next year wherever McNiven went Bobby went and the bond between dog and master deepened with each of the old man's regular excursions soon the lonely but gracious gent and his wiry stray were a familiar sight on the streets of Edinburgh Bobby's supper was no longer to be found among the cobbles nor his bed beneath an old gas lamp the year passed and the next winter storms came back to make their claim savage and unrelenting they this time sought out old McNiven whose step was by then no longer as firm not his blood as warm as the year before he died in his garret though not alone and was laid to rest in Greyfriars churchyard and Bobby followed amid the howlings and bleatings of ravenous winter winds or the soft still warmth of endless summer evenings

Bobby was there sitting on top of the grave and there he remained with an unmoving and flinching and yielding faithfulness for years afterwards this time fed by numerous local admirers as close as he could be to his old man with the steady step and the kindly heart and to this day the story is true not a mile from Edinburgh Castle you can see for yourselves a statue in Greyfriars churchyard erected in tribute to faithful Bobby the subject for our thoughts this morning is faithfulness first and foremost the faithfulness of God towards us but also following upon that faithfulness in the lives of Christian people may I say immediately that however touching and sentimental is the story of Greyfriars Bobby it is not meant to depict the relationship between the Christian and his God we are not the lapdogs of the almighty responding only to the hand that feeds however much we may or may not be or may not have started the Christian life as bedraggled spiritual strays however much our relationship to God is one of dependence and surely it is whatever truths may be portrayed in that short tale about what it means to be faithful and persevering the analogy is so limited as to make it rather inappropriate the objective realities concerning the faithfulness of God which we shall examine in a moment have dimensions far beyond anything that story contains but our story is considered by some truly to reflect the God-man relationship it is alleged that the so-called faithfulness of God is but a well-constructed myth an illusion in the minds of the gullible after all the sun shines on the just and the unjust alike does it not and that illusion has really less substance than the bread in old MacNiven's pocket in turn faithfulness on the part of the individual

Christian to his God is likened to the habits and instincts of a domestic pet in the wake of both Darwin and of Freud there is at large the notion that human behaviour is nothing more than the expression of a complex series of animal drives thus whether in social sexual economic or even religious spheres the way we act and interact can be wholly attributed to either a psychological or a biological mechanism serving the needs either of the individual or his parent species more particularly when it comes to our Christian faith not only is loyalty to Jesus Christ regarded as sitting on top of a dead man's tomb it is condescendingly considered to be a throwback among the naive and the unenlightened to behaviour which is of interest only to anthropologists alternatively such habits are interpreted as the expression of some deep psychological need fulfilment an emotional crutch if you like which the more robust and mature among us can satisfactorily do without thank you very much now however however sophisticated though these arguments may appear they do

[9 : 25] I contend fall far short of explaining the objective historical realities concerning the faithfulness of God just as much as they fail to dispel the unequivocal evidence of God's faithfulness in our own daily lives to which many if not all of us are able to bear witness but let's backpedal for just a moment to consider what we mean by the faithfulness of God and of all the scriptures dealing with this theme perhaps the Psalms figure most prominently and so I'd like you to turn back with me to the passage which we read earlier in Psalm 89 found on page 524 of our pew Bibles in this Psalm I'd like to draw your attention to three aspects concerning the faithfulness of God I'm going to be jumping

I'm going to be quoting some of the verses and jumping but if I jump they'll be in sequence and so I won't give you every verse that I'm quoting from the first point to note is that faithfulness ultimately has its origins in the character of God now the preeminent characteristic of our God is that he is a God of love indeed as we read in John's first epistle God is love and since this is the nature of a being whose existence is also eternal it leads us to conclude that faithfulness is love that lasts for this reason as we see in verse 1 the love of God is described as steadfast meaning enduring I will sing thy steadfast love O Lord forever with my mouth I will proclaim thy faithfulness to all generations and here steadfast love and faithfulness are used if you like interchangeably as synonyms in later verses verses 5 through 14 the psalmist makes a comparison between certain features of creation the earth the seas and the skies and the character of God and that's a theme that runs in many of the psalms and he leads us to see that because God is who he is the creator not the created that his divine attributes notably in this psalm his steadfast love and faithfulness surpass even the most enduring qualities of what we can see with our eyes verse 5 let the heavens praise thy wonders

O Lord thy faithfulness in the assembly of the holy ones for who in the skies can be compared to the Lord who among the heavenly beings is like unto the Lord O Lord God of hosts who is mighty as thou art with thy faithfulness round about thee thou dost rule the raging of the sea when its waves rise thou stillest them the heavens are thine the earth also is thine the world and all that is in it thou hast founded them righteousness and justice are the foundations of thy throne high above this created order steadfast love and faithfulness go before thee thus we see that faithfulness is an integral part of the character of God and as I'm going to define it for our morning spots it is love that lasts the second point to note is that faithfulness is love with a purpose now there are two interpretations that you can possibly put on this psalm if you look at it as referring again and again to David and to his succession among the Jews but an alternative and I think a far more exciting interpretation is that we can see in these verses a prophetic utterance foretelling the life of Christ his victory over death and all that is evil and the establishment of his church verse 19 of old thou didst speak in a vision to thy faithful one

David or Christ we concentrate on Christ here and say I have set the crown upon one who is mighty I have exalted one chosen from the people I have found I have found David my servant with my holy oil I have anointed him so that my hand shall ever abide with him my arm shall also strengthen him the enemy the forces of evil shall not outwit him and wicked the wicked shall not humble him I will crush his foes before him and strike down those who hate him 28 my steadfast love will I keep with him forever and my covenant will stand firm for him I will establish as a function of that faithfulness and steadfast love I will establish his line forever and his throne as in as the day as the days of the heavens now for generations men lived in the aftermath of sounds like these by faith trusting that God will fulfill his purpose we are not called to stretch our faith to that extent because 2000 years later we can stand firmly on the historical fact of the life and death of Jesus Christ and all that followed his life and death and his resurrection and we face quite squarely all those who claim we are deluded and point to the objective evidences of the faithfulness of God in the life of Christ and the establishment of his church faithfulness then secondly is love with a purpose the covenant the establishment of the covenant of God with his people there is more even to faithfulness than that for faithful the faithfulness of God described in this psalm is also love that perseveres indifference self-centeredness malice hatred indeed all manner of human perversity and wickedness these were the things against which the love of God in Christ Jesus prevailed even when that meant nails and a cross the tearing of flesh and the spilling of blood and God has not changed in the new covenant whose tokens are bread and wine as much as in the old

God confronts the same ugly features of our human nature but we find that his faithfulness is not determined by our moral integrity he may rebuke he may trust eyes he may discipline and I wonder how many of us in our Christian lives are sensitive to God at work in these things but never but never will he deny his love for us thus we read going to verse 30 if his children forsake my law and do not walk according to my ordinances if they violate my statutes and do not keep my commandments then I will punish their transgressions with the rod and their iniquity with scourges but I will but I will not remove from him my steadfast love or be false to my faithfulness I will not violate my covenant now I just want us to pause for a moment and ask ourselves are we thoroughly grounded in our knowledge and assurance of the faithfulness of God towards us are we aware that if we confess our sins as it says again in John's first letter

[16 : 36] God is faithful and just not fickle or capricious or moody and he will forgive us and cleanse us and even if we do not which I'm not recommending and remain wayward or backslidden or distant from him are we aware that love that lasts love with a purpose love that perseveres will hound us down the years never letting go never letting go never letting go until such time as he has embraced our lives entirely for himself have we not known have we not heard has it not been told to us from the beginning have we not understood from the foundations of the earth there is a God in heaven whose steadfast love towards mankind is from everlasting to everlasting let sober knowledge of that fact soak into the deepest fibers of our being not only will it open our eyes to a host of spiritual as well as material blessings it will dignify our lives with a wholesome sense of security that enables us to withstand even the darkest of life's experiences from the faithfulness of God let us turn to faithfulness as an aspect of Christian character you're standing at the back of the church the congregation becomes aware of you and they are hushed in expectant silence one or two heads gaze in your direction but their friendly smiles do nothing to ease your inner fluttering the organ strikes up in bold exuberant tones and the air is vibrant with triumphant praise you swallow hard and start to move this is it the moment of life has come the aisle seems endless and your legs are awkward and heavy but halfway down you are met by the person's eyes enthralling smiling and tender they beckon you down these last few trembling steps and do not let go even when at last you're there you're transfixed by their stillness calmed by their warmth dearly beloved the words seem distant and then suddenly it's you who is speaking

I Robin I John I I I I I I I I I I I take thee Jesus Christ to be my wedded heavenly spouse to have and to hold from this day forward for better for worse for richer for poorer in sickness and in health to love and to cherish till death us finally unite according to God's holy covenant and there too I give thee my truth no other vows are made the bridegroom's vows were declared in eternity now of all human relationships that between a husband and a wife is particular and special its uniqueness as well as its universality in human society is intended by God to enrich and sustain human life as can no other relationship but it is also given to us as the model portraying

Christ's relationship to us as individual Christians and to us corporately as his church so that we might understand more fully the intimate dimensions and consequences of the relationship we have with him into which we enter by our vows of faith now some may feel uncomfortable with this notion but may as if I feel it's usually when they wish to keep God at a respectable arm's length in the song of Solomon in Isaiah in Hosea in the gospels and in Ephesians the theme that Christ is related to us as a bride is to a bridegroom is repeatedly stated the climax of these passages is reached in the book of Revelation where our final destiny as the church of Jesus Christ is declared in these words Revelation 19 68 hallelujah for the Lord our God the omnipotent reigns let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory for the marriage of the lamb has come and his bride has made herself ready blessed are those invited to the marriage supper of the lamb now marriage vows perhaps the most memorable of which

I've just referred to a moment ago are intended not to intensify the passions or emotions of a relationship but to ensure that no matter what love develops into something mature committed faithful and loyal they recognize the intrinsic fallibility of human nature in achieving such ideals by undergirding the whole of the relationship in a contractual obligation likewise these same attributes commitment loyalty faithfulness and so on these same attributes in our love for God ought to be developing not as consequences of whims or feelings or dependent upon circumstances as so often they do but as a matter of obligation to our vows we are the bride of Christ and our profession of faith as Christians commits each one of us solemnly to a relationship not just for life but for eternity thus when it comes to faithfulness to Jesus Christ it is first and foremost a matter of obedience and as a corollary of all that it seems self-evident but it's worth stating that just as in human marriage so in the spiritual one where vows are forgotten neglected disobeyed or overturned trouble of one sort or another is bound to follow let us be soberly aware of that but there are sound reasons for faithfulness in our commitment to Jesus Christ far beyond mere obedience and some of which are also the mechanisms by which such faithfulness grows and develops and comes about first of all we ought to be responders to the faithfulness of God we've already examined some aspects of that faithfulness but beyond

God's faithfulness to us in the objective realities of history and the objective realities of our own redemption do we not see that again and again in our daily lives we are confronted with his faithful providence Bill played greatest by faithfulness earlier on between the lessons and the words of that particular hymn sum it all up hands up all those whom God has abandoned oh indeed we may feel that as Christ himself felt it hanging on the cross but the real facts if we take time to dwell upon them is that such a particular feeling is that our feelings are all that they are we are in the care of a thoroughly enduring love the love of God is there nothing stirs within us by way of a response surely it ought to as the father has loved us so ought we to love him as he has been loyal and committed towards us so ought we in return to return measures of the same let us not be niggardly with God secondly we ought to be imitators of God as Paul admonishes us in Ephesians 5 and 1 in our attitude to one another as well as in our attitude to him at his very crudest and you'll understand what I mean by this when we go on to the next point the Christian life is one of following an example the example of Jesus Christ he was faithful to his heavenly father even to the point of giving up his life and we are called to be his disciples to follow in his footsteps to be imitators of him and thirdly and I think this transcends all that has gone before in terms of how and why

[25 : 10] Christian faithfulness ought to develop in our lives we ought to be channels for the faithfulness of God not note that it's his faithfulness not ours in a passage with which I'm sure most of you are familiar in Galatians 5 and 22 we have a list of the fruits of the Holy Spirit love joy peace patience gentleness goodness self-control kindness faithfulness and the best translation of the word the Greek word uses really loyalty but whatever the Christ-like characteristic that God desires in us at its best it comes not not by imitation in which our own human limitations quickly become apparent but by the inner transformation that permits Jesus Christ to live his resurrected life through us thanks be to God although we are never absolved from our responsibilities to be obedient from our responsibilities to be responsive from our responsibilities to be imitators when it comes down to it the work of living the Christian life is ultimately not our own but God's the transformation is indeed painfully slow but nothing is more winsome to men or pleasing to God than the life of whom it can be said there is a man in whom it is no longer he who is living but Christ who lives in him such inner surrender to the Holy Spirit is the key to the development of all Christian virtues including faithfulness how much more do we need that quality of surrender that quality of permission in our own lives which allows God to work the divine nature within us finally what does all this mean in practical terms we are called by God to a personal pilgrimage a journey and in this pilgrimage of discipleship faithfulness loyalty perseverance are the qualities of character that will be required of us the pleasures and concerns of this world just as much as its pains and trials will challenge us at every turn temptations to doubt to unbelief to spiritual infidelity will never be far away whatever our circumstances the devil will make quite sure of that but God does not intend that we should go it alone beyond all the resources that we have in our relationship with Jesus Christ and these would require a multitude of sermons to explore he also gives us one another the church not only as a means by which we are encouraged and supported but more importantly as a practical class in which our loyalty and faithfulness to him are demonstrated on a horizontal level for in as much as we do so unto the least of our brethren we do so unto him in Acts chapter 2 we read that the first Christians devoted themselves devoted them they were faithful in worship and praise to prayer to the apostles teaching to the breaking of bread and to meeting one another's needs that was the simple yet comprehensive prescription for the church's life together to which God called them and it changed the world and God is calling us to lives of similar commitment governed by the same simple priorities not to a life of tedious religious observances inspired only by habit or duty not to a life which becomes bogged down in the clutter and paraphernalia which is so often made to pass for the life of the church not to a life of loose social relationships in which belonging to our church always remains peripheral rather he calls us

to a wholehearted unreserved participation in the life of the body of Christ regularity in our worship of God consistency in our study of his word commitment to corporate prayer and persevering loyalty to one another with all our faults in times of need as much as in times of plenty these are the things to which God is calling us to be faithful not as an end in themselves but as a means of his grace towards us for us and for our children there is no greater privilege there is no higher calling there is no more glorious purpose than that we should live as God richly intends members of the body of Christ his son let us then as we go forward together to receive tokens of that same body respond in our hearts and resolve afresh to be steadfast in our faithfulness to God who has and ever will be faithful in his love to us ■■■ 25 to be faithful to our that other others that others who