

A Great Prayer

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[0 : 00] Okay, I'd like to return for a little while this morning before the baptisms to the psalm that Jenny read. We are doing, for those of you who are visiting today, we've been doing a series on the psalms of the Old Testament, the songs in the Old Testament, the hymns of the Old Testament, and poems of the Old Testament.

And we've been looking at them as part of God's Word, part of His message to us today. And the book of Psalms in the Old Testament is split into five separate books.

And so we've just been taking two from each of these books and looking at them and seeing what message they have for them. This is a great poem, it's a great song, and it's a great prayer.

I've entitled this hymn in a great prayer because that's exactly what it is. And we find that the Psalms are seeped in the bigger picture of who God is and what God is doing, His purpose.

And it also really expresses tremendously powerfully some of our longings as human beings, some of our fears, some of our doubts.

[1 : 04] They're searingly honest in what they say. And we recognize they don't sugarcoat the faith that we have, but they're absolutely honest.

And in a while, towards the end of the baptisms, we're going to be singing the Old Testament priestly blessing, the Aaronic blessing.

Maybe we can get that first slide up, which gives us that blessing from numbers. We have the first slide up? Yep. Okay, the priestly blessing.

The Lord said to Moses, tell Aaron and his sons, this is how we are to bless the Israelites. Say to them, the Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make His face to shine upon you and be gracious to you. The Lord turn His face towards you and give you peace.

And we're going to sing that as a congregation to the babies that will be baptized. And that great blessing encapsulates what we know as Christians in our lives, the blessing of God and also for something we pray for our children.

[2 : 07] And it's something we long for, for those who are not Christians, that they will also enjoy the blessing of God. So the Lord bless you and keep you. Okay, that's fine. That's a massive concept, the whole idea of the blessing of God.

It's a huge, big, important concept in the Bible. And we've looked at it actually before in a couple of the Psalms, because really blessing, the word blessing is just a word for happiness.

And we've looked at where true happiness comes from. And the Bible is telling us all the time, and Jesus is telling us all the time that true happiness comes from God, that we never truly find it fully or permanently anywhere or with anyone else except with God.

That's really what His challenge and His claim is. At best the happiness is, if that's a word that we enjoy, our shadows in a sense that push us towards true happiness, and maybe sometimes even convict us towards our Creator in search for more, in search for more permanent happiness.

And sometimes as we question why there isn't happiness and why we're struggling with unhappiness, and the word of God drives us towards finding a shelter in Him for happiness in our lives from the shelter, shelter from the storms of life, from the guilt within, and also tragically from the finality of death.

[3 : 44] Because the happiness of God, the true happiness, the blessing of God, which we will pronounce on all our children today, is deep, a deep-rooted piece that is found knowing and trusting in Jesus Christ.

It's that all is well in our lives when we have put our trust in Jesus. And it is an elusive happiness if we are searching for it without God.

And this blessing, which is mentioned a lot, it bookends the psalm. It starts and it finishes the psalm, so you get shout for joy all the earth, sing to joy all the earth, give glory to His glorious name. Oh, sorry. Read, read the wrong psalm. It's 100,000, that's not what I was saying. 66, by the way, we'll maybe do that another week. So sorry, Psalm 67.

I was just checking to see if you're all awake here. May God be gracious to us and bless us, make His face to shine upon us. So that's a reflection of that psalm. And then the last verse is, God bless us, let all the ends of the earth fear Him.

[4 : 53] That's fine, you put that slide up again, that you just put up. That's a good one. Yeah. That's fine, the first one. It's a really evocative opening line.

May God be gracious to us and bless us and make His face to shine upon us. And then it says, say la. So that's a word in the psalm as well. And nobody really knows what that means.

It's probably a technical term or a musical term, which says, take a break. Now you think, very strange that you take a break right at the beginning of the psalm. But I think it's saying something so important that it says, right, let's just stop and pause there for a moment.

It's recalling, as I said earlier, the Aaronic blessing that we'll be singing in a minute. And that blessing, that Aaronic blessing is mentioned in very clearly and distinctly in four other psalms in the book of Psalms.

And the whole idea of blessing is explicit in at least a third of the psalms that we sing. It would have been very familiar to the Old Testament people of God.

[5 : 54] They understood the idea of true happiness coming from trusting and following their God. It was very much that Aaronic blessing was very much the chorus of their lives. Have you got a chorus for your life?

Have you got something that you would keep coming back to as something that was significant and important? Well, the blessing of God, that whole idea would have been the chorus of the Old Testament people of God.

And the central themes of that blessing are really what God wants us to know. And all people come to know, and for us as Christians, if we are Christians here today, to understand more and more for ourselves and also obviously for our children.

Because if I went around the church today and asked, you know, your definition of happiness, happiness is, what is happiness? I'm sure we'd find all kinds of, millions of different definitions if we went throughout the nation and ask people what they think happiness is, where they would find their happiness.

Because Christians, what we believe is that we experience true happiness when we appreciate at least two things that are in the Psalm.

[7 : 03] There's a lot more. But there's at least two things in the Psalm that help us to think about God's blessing and it's something that we want for our children as well. The first is God's strong hand.

Okay, may God be gracious to us and bless us, make His face to shine upon us. And then it goes on to speak about His saving power among the nations. Now the Old Testament people have understood what that meant in its historic context, that God was their redeemer.

God had taken them physically from slavery in the land of Egypt and set them in their own land and wanted them to be the nation that would worship Him and be a light to the whole of the world.

And of course, we know that didn't really happen. They turned away from their God. But it does also point forward to the great revelation of God in Jesus, Jesus with a really strong hand.

The one who has done for us what we couldn't do for ourselves, what we are powerless spiritually to make ourselves right with God, to be in a good relationship with God because of our sin.

[8 : 13] Jesus comes into the world in order to be our Savior. And every inch of what the Bible speaks about and every inch of this universe and every moment in history and every part of God's revelation reveals His purpose and His plan to rescue us from darkness and from unhappiness and from despair and from lostness and from the brutality of death and even His just judgment against us to give us hope and life and love because of His great love for us in Christ.

To give us the strength of character and heart and mind to whatever is thrown at us because He loves us and because He went to the cross to defeat all the evil and the darkness and the unhappiness that destroys life that we know it so often because He wanted to gift us what we couldn't do for ourselves.

So it's that love of a father, isn't it? Love of a parent. The parents will come up to them, they know all about it and we all know as parents who are parents here that you would do anything. You would go to the ends of there. You would die for your children because of your great love. It changes everything. Spoke to a new parent at a wedding. I'm going to mention this wedding again. Yes, on Friday, just a new baby and they just, I said, how are you getting on?

Just a big strong man, a muscly man. He said, oh yeah, it changes everything. Do anything for that child. You know, big strong, hard fisherman.

[9 : 45] And yet his whole life has changed because of this tiny little child, the love of a parent that drives them forward. And it's the love of God that's driven us to say, you know, to deal with the unhappiness and the sinner lives by sending his own son.

And so we teach our children and we recognize that God is strong and that Jesus is strong. We're teaching our kids, aren't we? We're going to teach our kids that Jesus isn't a weakling, that true strength and true love go together.

He's our warrior king. He's our great hero, hero of all heroes. And he's strong and he's mighty. That same wedding I was doing was my nephew's wedding and he was very nervous before the wedding.

There had been a lot of difficult things in the family over the last 18 months. And in fact, some of you here know in the congregation that you've been praying for his nephew, Callum, who had E. Coli and then had a stroke, a two-year-old who was in hospital in Glasgow.

In the congregation here, he'd been praying for Callum and he is making a recovery now, which is amazing, a miracle because he very nearly died. But this was his uncle that was getting married and he was very, very afraid that he was going to be terribly emotional in this service and then in the speeches.

[10 : 58] He did pretty well in the service, but he was a nervous and emotional wreck in the speeches when he spoke about Callum and he spoke about other losses they'd had in their family. But I just took him aside before the service and those in the congregation will know exactly that I had the authority to say this.

Took him aside and I held him by the arm and I said, real men cry, Mark. Real men cry. And that's so true, isn't it?

It's not a mark of weakness. It is a mark of sensitivity and grace and the knowledge that emotion and relying on God and being able to be moved is not a sign of weakness, it's a sign of strength.

And Jesus Himself was the greatest evidence of that. He loved us enough. He was moved enough on our behalf and he was honest enough with us to go to the cross.

And His great loving and His great grace to be our big, strong, Savior and protector in our lives. So we recognize one thing here is God's strong hand in salvation for us and which we teach ourselves.

[12 : 13] The other thing we see, among other things probably in this Psalm, again in verse 1 is God's shining face. God be gracious to us, bless us, make His face to shine upon us.

And that's an image we have there. It's symbolic. It's a picture of the character of God and of His light and of His face turned towards us and goes on to speak about His guidance leading us.

And that is a really strong picture of what it is to put our trust in God and to believe in Him and to love Him. It's the idea of the whole favor of a renewed relationship.

It's that our back is not turned towards God, but we are facing Him and His face, His light, His truth is shining into our lives.

And there's a living relationship, spiritual one. We're not physically face to face, but it's speaking of a spiritual relationship. You know how important that is, isn't it?

[13 : 16] You found over these last 18 months how difficult it is to relate to one another properly with masks on because you can't see the whole of someone's face. You miss out all kinds of characteristics and physical indications of happiness or sadness or whatever it might be.

We miss that. We struggle with that face to face contact. And that's, I guess, where the word actually hypocrite came from.

The hypocrite was the mask that the Greek, those who played in plays, would wear to cover their faces.

And it was to cover their real identity. That's where we get the idea of being a hypocrite where you're not showing your real self. And so the whole picture here is of being honest and open in a relationship with God and with His light shining into our lives, His truth shining into our lives.

An amazing place where we come face to face with God. In Jesus Christ, the search for that true happiness is over, although the journey has just begun, but the search is over.

[14 : 28] And we find that we are at peace and in relationship with our God, with our Maker, that face to face relationship. And we can only enjoy that light when we come to face up to the darkness that sometimes we recognize is in our own hearts.

You know how that could be very difficult? You know, if you've been in a dark place for a while and you come out into the light, it just pierces our eyes and we can't face it till we get used to it. And the piercing truth of God's holiness can make us recoil and turn away from it. We can't deal with that. It's too demanding until we see the light of the world Jesus Christ plunged into darkness on the cross in our place.

You know, that's why He says that. And that's what happened physically again to help us understand that when He was on the cross at midday, 12 o'clock, the sun is at its highest, we're told in the Gospels that darkness came upon the whole land between 12 o'clock and 3 in the afternoon. Because it was God symbolically speaking to us about Christ walking into our darkness to die in our place so that we can know His light.

[15 : 44] So that is an incredible friendship God's shining face in our experience and in our lives. It's a place of peace. It's a place where as Christians we pray, where we learn, where we grow in love, where we worship, where we serve, where we're forgiven.

Isn't that great? Every day as many times as we need, we're forgiven because the price has been paid for our sins. We're constantly changing where we have a whole new life every day with Him, even in the darkest of times.

We know that He doesn't ever let go of us because He loves us, even when we don't understand that to life and death. Friendship like no other that transforms us from the inside out.

And so with our kids, we don't only tell them and we don't want them to know that Jesus is strong and kind, but also that Jesus and God are our best friends.

The parents will say, as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord. They will know, and the parents today are going to bring up their kids so that they will know that Jesus is not a stranger in the house.

[16 : 52] He's not an ogre, that He's not a magic genie, that He's not a cartoon character, but He fills the lives of the home with great joy and love in their responses, in their reactions, in their choices.

That He's the one who they will go to for help, that He is holy, that He's gracious, that He's gentle, and that they will find the home a safe and a good place to learn and grow in their knowledge of Jesus.

So that, Sam speaks about these two things. I'm nearly finished. And the message of the gospel is that this God is for us all. He's universally relevant.

In verse 4 we've got that great prophetic truth, let the nations be glad and sing for joy for you judge the peoples with equity and guide the nations upon earth. And this whole idea that the gospel was to go out, which we see in the New Testament, when Jesus died and rose again and gave the great commission to go out into all the world with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

It's not a Jewish religion. It's not a Western religion. It's not an Old Testament religion. It's not a national religion. It's not a God channel religion.

[18 : 08] This prophetic reality of the Sam is reminding us that if you are a human being, if you laugh, if you cry, if you make moral judgments, if you relate to other people, if you love, if you hate, if you fail, if you succeed, if you grow young or grow old, if you get ill and recover, if you're born and if you die, you're an image bearer of this living God.

The image is broken by our own sin and an image broken that leaves us accountable to Him and in great need as we consider His justice and holiness because we can never match up to His perfections to be in relationship with Him unless that barrier between us and Him is dealt with.

But He comes to provide that in Jesus Christ and He offers His great love and that's where we find it, the foot of the cross. The parents here and all of us seek to be Christians that always go to the foot of the cross to find our hope and our future and our relationship with God.

That brings us to a place of praise in our lives. It's an amazing thing. This little chorus that is repeated twice in verse 3 and 5, let the people praise you, oh God, let all the people praise you.

The same word is repeated again, let the people praise you, God, let the people praise you. We are able to praise and sometimes we're even able to praise through our tears and through our darkness because we know that these things do not have ultimately the victory in our lives.

[19 : 41] So, it's universally relevant and as Christians we are called to burn bright in the same way as we reflect the shining face of God towards us.

And that blessing that we mentioned at the beginning, the irony blessing that we'll be singing in a little while, that was given to the priests in the Old Testament, the ones who represented the people before God, they had special access to God and they were to make that blessing and give it to the people.

But interestingly, they were to do that so that the people would then shine. They would reflect God that, you know, may your face shine upon us, that your way may be known on earth and your saving power known through it.

So they were to be a people who were to shine. Can we have that next text up, Exodus 19? That's when Moses speaks to the people and he calls them as the sentence in verse 40, he says, You yourselves have seen what I did in Egypt.

God says, How I carried you on eagle's wings and brought you to myself. Now, if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you'll be a treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be from me, a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

[20 : 55] So, not only were the priests to deliver the blessing, but the whole nation of Israel were supposed to kind of like be priests to the rest of the world and shine for God and reveal who he was.

But really the story of the Old Testament is a story that they failed miserably. A lot of the time they went back to idols and they ignored God and they went their own way.

But then Christ comes and Christ comes to be the once for all great high priest. Can we have that next text up? Or were told in Hebrews, since we have a great high priest who has ascended to heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly the faith we profess for.

We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weakness, but one who has been tempted in every way just as we are yet without sin. So we approach God through Jesus as we trust in Jesus and we can see and be in relationship with God.

And you know, the interesting thing is that as we trust in him as Christians, we are to make known his love and his light to the world around us.

[22 : 01] The last couple of verses there. So in the New Testament, this whole concept of priesthood is explained. He says, Christians, you are a chosen people, you are a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

You see the connection? That it's the same spiritual truth that's being spoken of. And then in 2 Corinthians there, we are to reflect him. We don't preach ourselves, but we preach Christ as your servants for Jesus' sake.

For God who said, let light shine out of darkness, made his light to shine in our hearts. You see, so it's symbolic, it's been spoken of here, to give the light or the truth of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Jesus Christ.

So it's all intertwined. It's all fusing together. As we come to know Jesus, we know God and we are therefore to reflect his love, his compassion, his justice, his care for people, his truth.

And our story of how he's transformed us from the inside out, we're to share that. We're to share that because it's the most important thing in our lives and because we have been turned upside down by his love and by his incredible compassion.

[23 : 24] And so the parents today will be seeking to do that first and foremost to their own children that they will take vows on behalf of. And our lives are to be those that declare that Jesus Christ is our friend and has transformed us from the inside out with his light and with his truth.

Now I read a really challenging phrase, a little statement this week that made me think for us if we're Christians here today.

If Christianity were a crime, would there be enough evidence to convict us? So we're called to be those who reflect the love and grace and commitment and truth and beauty of Jesus Christ.

We're called to live by a different light and by the truth and the grace that has transformed our lives. So in baptism, and with this I close, we recognize that baptism is a sacrament.

It's a command for every new believer, repent and be baptized. We recognize that. It's given to us in the New Testament. It's a public declaration, isn't it?

[24 : 42] It's a sign of what Jesus has already done, that washing, a way of sins and of the things that separate us from him and from one another and makes us right with God because of what Jesus has done in our place.

And it speaks of our union with Him and of the reality of the living water that then kind of symbolically it comes from our lives. The price has been paid that we believe that, we trust that, put our faith in Him.

We recognize it as something that people who have never been baptized who come to faith get done, they get baptized. But also we believe through the covenant, the Abrahamic covenant that is followed into the New Testament that for believing parents, the sign of the covenant is one that's also to be given to their children on the basis of their own faith and of the promises they believe are applicable to their own children.

The special privileges have been born and brought up in a home where the parents are Christians. The privileges have been shown Christ, knowing the truth and being encouraged to put their own faith in Jesus.

As I mentioned baptism last week, that Jesus moves from the home into the heart of each child as they come to recognize Him as Lord. It's not a, it doesn't save them.

[26 : 06] Baptism is just a symbol, doesn't save anybody. It's a sign of the promises of God and what God has done and what God promises to do in faithfulness to His covenant.

And we are all part of that because we take a vow as a congregation as well because we're part of God's family. We all have a role to play as we've seen before in the upbringing of our children together in God's family as a community to be a witness to them and also to the city and the world around us.

And we need great grace to do that. Let's pray. Father God, we ask and pray that You would help us, that You would guide us, that You would teach us, that You would show us Your way, that You would lead us in Your truth, that Your name would be honored in this baptism, in these baptisms and that Christ would be given all the praise and all the glory.

And we do pray as we invite the family, the parents to come forward shortly, that You'd bless them, that You'd watch over them, the Armstrong's, the Carter's, the Matheson's, the Oliver's, all of us as families, all of us as individuals, all of us with our families, here or wherever they may be with our siblings, those that we love, those who are close to us and those who we share deep and powerful realities.

We pray that Jesus would have the honor and the praise and all that we do as we outwork this baptism, sacrament of baptism together. We ask it in Jesus' precious name.

[27 : 50] Amen.