

Celebrating God's Faithfulness

God is good ... all the time.

For most of my journey I have been a Christian. I put this down to God's faithfulness. Over the years, I have seen just about every type of experiment people pursue, the temporary pleasures and ultimate futility of much of it. I have observed the deep concerns and abiding questions that spring from human hearts, the aspirations that drive people, the griefs that wrack families and communities, the underlying debates about meaning and the role of religion in answering the important questions in life. A wise man once said to me that the proof of the durability of Christianity is not how steep the race is, but how long. I have found that to be true. It is not how persuasively we win the argument about the nature of truth, but what works when we put it into practice, what endures because it is based on revelation and what is fluff. In my estimation, the most remarkable, most powerful, but most simple, truth is that God is real and that he is faithful to His children. That is why Christianity works. Christians should be the most positive people in the world. Celebration of His reality and faithfulness has the latent capacity to act as a gigantic magnet to draw others to him. It is time to respond to skepticism and pervasive negativity by celebrating God's faithfulness, deliberately, consciously, joyfully and very publicly.

Celebration greater than commemoration

There is an enormous difference between commemoration and celebration. Let me explain. I have lived in different parts of the world and had opportunities to observe religion at work in distinct cultures. I have come to the conclusion that a major difference between Christianity and every other belief system is the sense of celebration. Most religions commemorate events and individuals. For example, every year Shi'ite Muslims observe Ashura, in memory of the assassination of Hussayn, the grandson of Muhammed at Karbala in modern Iraq. Buddhists commemorate a tooth of the Buddha, or a footprint attributed to him. In Jerusalem I once visited Yad Vashem, a powerful and poignant museum dedicated to the commemoration of millions of Jews who died during the Holocaust period in Europe in the twentieth century. Civic religion everywhere commemorates wars and other pivotal events and personalities in national histories, using monuments, statues, stamps, coins and other memorabilia.

The problem is, commemoration is linked to the past, to "memory"; it is not about the present or the future. Buildings and plaques commemorate, whereas people are designed to celebrate and have hope beyond the moment. This is a paramount difference. Events in the Bible can be commemorated as important developments in history, as milestones, but true Christianity goes beyond commemoration. Christians celebrate. When activated by faith, celebration stems from the belief that God is NOW (in fact, he is yesterday, now and afterwards), His Word is true, His promises are reliable and our lives are ultimately fulfilled in him, regardless of what has gone before, how we feel, or what we are facing. He never goes to sleep on the job; his faithfulness is "forever" as he watches over everything we do (Psalm 89:1-2; 121).

Biblical Christians can be free from legalism, fear of the unknown, alienation in terms of the future and divine retribution for things they have done. Believers know God is real and very near, that he wants us to relate to him on a personal

level and that he understands what we face every step of the human journey. Our help is in a person. There is nothing that he does not know. He sees our every mistake, every stumble. He loves us as a father. As a faithful parent He disciplines, or “teaches” us (Hebrews 12:4-11). If we are to be relevant, we need to be able to see His master hand using events to train and equip us. The church that celebrates God will make a difference. The world will see that He is real and current. They will want what we have. They will come to understand that God is alive, dynamic, sovereign, loving and can be relevant to their lives.

Looking back at the evidence

When you are a child, the future is all potential. When the hair turns grey and the decade milestones come and go there are moments to reflect on what actually took place. As I look back, I know God has always been there. He has provided everything I have needed (not necessarily all that I wanted or demanded). I have sensed His presence with me, even in times of loneliness and the loss of loved ones (Christians face grief and loss like everyone else, but we know God is with us at those times).

I first became conscious of God when I was a child. As I got older, I felt the same frustrations, doubts, and growing pains any person faces, but God never left me. Jesus said, “I will not leave you as orphans”. I have felt his presence in times of danger and avoided car and aviation accidents in faraway places, evaded personal assault, been protected amid social upheaval, recovered from potentially life-threatening sicknesses, been equipped to cope with major disappointments and been given wisdom and ideas to manage difficult circumstances and complex projects as amazing doors of opportunity have opened up.

God has always been good. There were times when I did not feel his presence or hear His voice, but He was still there. Sometimes, possessions have been stripped away (as when our family’s and friends’ luggage, passports, tickets and cash were stolen during a holiday), but he has been present and provided grace to smile in the face of adversity. When I laid my brother, then my father and mother in their graves, He was there, wiping away tears (Revelation 7:17). I know he will be with me every day of my life (cf Isaiah 46:4). He will not allow me to be confronted with anything I cannot handle, with his help (1 Corinthians 10:13). I can trust him with the future welfare of my family. Like the people in the Bible, we will always be able to say, “Up to this point, God has helped us” (1 Samuel 7:12). He is absolutely faithful to His children.

The average person in the street depends on favourable events and circumstances for their happiness. Christians, on the other hand, know that not every day is an emotional or circumstantial “high”, but that our lives are underpinned by Someone who is greater than whatever life dishes up.

It is natural to ask “Why?” when things that seem unfair or unbearable happen to us. David, in the Psalms, frequently responded to difficulties by questioning God’s faithfulness. “God, are you still there?” On reflection, he always ended up revising his opinion and coming back with stronger faith than ever. Even Jesus asked, “My God, why have you forsaken me?”, when he was nailed to the cross, but finished praying, “Into your hands I commit my spirit”. God hadn’t abandoned him; it just seemed that way for a moment. It is hard to be objective when we feel overwhelmed by circumstances. That’s where faith comes in and we learn to

trust Him regardless of what we feel or see. There is no one more trustworthy. He heals the broken-hearted, comforts the bereaved, binds their wounds and gives them inner strength. Tragedies do not invalidate His presence, purpose or care. We do not need to change our theologies to match circumstances.

God's faithfulness greater than variable human circumstances

The Bible tells us there is a time and a season for everything. The strongest Christian will face life and death, health and sickness, abundance and lack, some experiences that build up and others that seem to demolish possessions and plans. Things will not always go well. Job observed that God sometimes allows seemingly bad things to happen (Job 2:10). There is no sense living in denial. The Bible commands the barren to "sing", when there appears to be no reason to do so (Isaiah 54:1), when the natural inclination is to give up. Even "righteous people" go through testing times of great intensity. We feel it is hard to worship when things go pear-shaped. But worship is not about us; it is about God. It is not geared to sanctifying our traditions and expectations but emphasizing Him. By nature we are all self-centred and proud. We find it hard to express gratitude. We tend to think only of ourselves when things are going well. Christians are not immune from the highs and lows of relationships and personal feelings about circumstances. It is in looking back that we can evaluate the totality of what has gone before and see the hand of God upholding and His Spirit sustaining us (Psalm 139). As Jesus reminded us, God is a God of the living, of the "now".

God is able to do more than we can ask or think (Ephesians 3:20). He says, "If you call on me I will answer you." (Jeremiah 33:3; Psalm 50:15). Friends care, but they are limited. There are many things they simply cannot do to help, even if they are available and disposed to do so. On the other hand, God will not allow us to be removed (Psalm 55:22). Nothing can take us out of His hand (John 10:28-29). He has promised us "rest" (Matthew 11:28). We can trust him with our all, as a lifestyle choice. We know that he makes everything that happens in our circumstances work for good (Romans 8:28) and he is able to keep us from falling (1 Corinthians 1:8, 9; Jude 24).

Problems are a part of life, but God does not abandon us because we get into fixes. He does not destroy his servants. Even when we feel he is squeezing us, to produce change, we can still affirm that we trust Him with our lives. When faced with unusual or trying circumstances, Biblical faith says, "This has a purpose" (Job 23:10). Too many people opt for a form of Christian fatalism, directly or indirectly blaming God for allowing events to occur. It is easy to be cemented to our setbacks, but this is not God's way. The Bible repeatedly calls him the "God of hope". He is faithful when Christians suffer persecution, when a friend dies at the hands of an assailant, when abuse occurs, when financial problems appear overwhelming, when a sickness is not healed, when a friend is killed in a car accident, when Christians perish in a tsunami? It is assuring to know He has a purpose. Life is not a tiny blip of nothingness in the cosmos. Life IS God. His purpose is always to build something that will last for eternity.

Are we really convinced that God cares, that he is able and trustworthy? Do we live as though that confidence is real? Is it right or wrong to query God's faithfulness? There is no sense pretending. He can always remove a trial, if he desires, but sometimes he chooses not to do so. Paul asked three times for a particular trial to be lifted, but was told God's grace was enough. Only our heavenly father knows what is really in our hearts when we react against what is

going on in our lives. I believe we can ask for an explanation about what is happening without judging God (Romans 9:19-21). When we regularly and actively celebrate God's faithfulness as part of our lives, we won't be so quick to jump to conclusions and think God has let us down when things do not work out the way we want.

How does God show his faithfulness?

God is faithful. Not in the same way that a lap dog is faithful, attending on us at any given moment, trained to do our bidding, a plaything who amuses us as long as we "feel good" and get our way. His faithfulness is at the heart of His integrity and truth. Only He is fully faithful, totally reliable, unailing, ever-present, unswerving and dependent. The gods of the Greeks and Romans were capricious; so they became the subject of drama and satire. The gods of Islam, Hinduism and most tribal religions are distant and judgmental, out of reach, alien, arbitrary and fierce. The God and Father of Jesus Christ are reachable, compassionate, redemptive and absolutely true to His Word and to His children.

Apart from great theological statements that may or may not be readily applicable to how we feel at any given moment, what does all of this mean in our daily lives?

On one level God's faithfulness is all around us. He upholds everything (Hebrews 1:3). When people assert, "I don't need religion", then move up a gear to declare they do not need God, they are being patently absurd. If He should remove his hand for a moment, the universe would spin out of control. We need him for the air we breathe. The Bible says that, "in him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28). If He should take his hands off the levers, we would all be dead. That is why our family gives thanks at every meal, as a reminder that He is our source, our sustainer. Everything we have ultimately comes from Him. Celebration of God's goodness is a celebration of life itself.

There are many ways in which Christians experience God's faithfulness. These include his presence in times of suffering; His strength in times of temptation; His faithfulness in showing us how to live wisely in all our human relationships, through His Word and His people; His faithfulness in avenging those who suffer for him. The bottom line is that we can trust him with our lives and know He has our good at heart (this is what Satan failed to realize when he mistakenly thought Job's reaction to suffering would be to curse God to His face, cf Job 1:11; 2:5). The fact is, he has a purpose (cf Job 23:10). It is not enough to say, "God knows" when circumstances are beyond our control. That can imply that He is aware but indifferent. Some things happen by divine permission and we never work them out objectively. However, there is always a bottom line. David said that he had never seen the righteous going without. In times of trouble (and he had lots of those), he kept reminding himself that God was his refuge and help (Ps 46:1, 2). That can be our experience as well.

God shows his faithfulness by putting us in relationships, such as families; or providing experienced Christians as leaders and mentors to care for us spiritually (Hebrews 13:17). Whatever happens, He is described as a father looking after his family, caring for the vulnerable, a pastor overseeing his sheep (Psalm 23). Even the deaths of his people are "precious" in his sight (Psalm 116:15).

God keeps his word. The Bible says he has elevated His word above His name; so we can rely on Him. He doesn't play favourites, but provides for everyone alike, from the smallest to the greatest (see Jesus' Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7). He is "faithful" to His promise in forgiving our sins when we confess them and ask him to do so (1 John 1:9). When we pray, believing that He hears and answers us, we are acting out of a conviction that He is faithful and will do what He has said (cf Psalm 143:1; 1 John 5:14, 15). Even in the midst of national and personal distress, the prophet Jeremiah was able to affirm that God's faithfulness was great (Lamentations 3:23). Faithfulness is part of his character and the basis of His promises (Psalm 132:11; Micah 7:20). He gives us grace to do all we need (2 Corinthians 9:8; 2 Corinthians 12:9, 10). There is no other god like our God.

Showing the world

In an age when the acquisition of indulgent trifles, search for self-definition and influence and strident demands for man's independence from his maker (modern man is, after all, "self-made and a worshipper of his creator"), Christians need to guard against being sucked into the vortex of natural selfishness and self-centredness. They (we) can do this by focusing, not on ourselves, our goals or claims to knowledge and achievement, nor yet by blandly insisting on our individuality and rights to personal space and opinion, but by humbly relying on the grace of God and consciously celebrating his faithfulness in our lives.

I believe that the constancy and consistency of the person and presence of Jesus Christ is the most potent contemporary testimony to Biblical relevance. He stands on every horizon, brighter than the rising sun, more powerful than the forces of nature, yet more close and tender and enduring than any human relationship. Having said that, people around us are not fundamentally interested in our epistemology, what they want to see is what works in practice.

People become disillusioned with human institutions. Politicians, businesses, coalitions, alliances, education theories, public services, financial systems, mass media, the entertainment industry and popular heroes all have the capacity to fail, and take followers down with them. The world needs to know a permanent God who loves unconditionally, who does not manipulate humanity to suit his caprices, who knows what we go through and sympathizes with us in our moments of pain, is able to give us assurances and power to be different, to stand out in an environment of conformity, does not stand at the top of the temple breathing fire (yet remains just) and who is real enough to come and live among us, having conquered death and defeat.

If Christians are to be relevant and attractive in today's world, they should actively celebrate the faithfulness of God. Friends will let us down. Money will run out. Employment will come to an end. Plans will fail to materialize. Equipment will fail. Health will falter. Wars and disease will break out. Thieves will break in and steal. Rust and time will corrode the most precious memories. Physical death will not diminish. However, God will always be there, bringing his purposes to pass in our lives. He assures us he will never change (Malachi 3:6a). Our hope is in Him.

Now is the time to celebrate God's faithfulness. Let's make a point of drawing closer to him, in love, confidence and appreciation, filled with His life, energized

by His Spirit, made new each day by His creative power, so that people will see our relationship is real and invite him into their own lives.