



## **Praise, Prayer & Preaching sermon**

# **Distracted discipleship**

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### **Psalm 5**

Here at Wesley Mission, this is the Sunday when we turn our minds to the important gift of Volunteering. This gift exercised at Wesley Mission is expressed in a wide variety of ways, as we have seen at both our lunch and throughout the service.

There is a long and honoured history of people serving their community, much of which has its roots in the Christian Church – so it is not inappropriate to celebrate such service as part of Christian worship.

I draw your attention to Psalm 5. I frequently refer to the psalms because they speak as the voice of every person:-

They have an utter sincerity in what they say  
The range of themes is enormous and covers almost every human emotion  
The deep humanity of God is revealed through the psalmists

The particular psalm that we have in mind was probably a morning prayer, but expressed with great integrity and honesty about the frustrations of life. Many people struggle with the fact that even the best intentions that we offer are often in the context of things that disappoint us. If we give ourselves to life's disappointments, or allow ourselves to be distracted by them, we will miss the very best that God has in store for us.

The psalmist introduces a contrast between a joyous response to God and a desire for deliverance.

There is a sense in which this psalm appears to be 'an individual lament'. It was most likely part of the morning liturgy in the Temple. I offer you three aspects of the psalm, which moves from understandable confidence in God to facing up to the challenges that life presents. In one sense, the psalm is deeply practical and sits comfortably within the context of a celebration and recognition of the contribution of volunteers in the life of Wesley Mission, throughout all its programs.

But before I do that, I would suggest that the psalmist appears to be of two minds –

Firstly, he offers his morning prayer with a sincere mind and lays before God a real understanding of his own situation and his dependence upon God. This could apply to each one of us, at any point in time.

On the other hand, his mind is troubled, especially when he considers those who are not making his life easy through their lies and deceit (v.v. 9-10). All of us may be able to relate to this at some level of our experience.

However, the psalm could be considered to be a realistic psalm about what life is like. We are filled with the best intentions and yet we are caught up in those things that would distract us from giving of our best and from seeing a real difference in the world around us.



We are more often than not distracted by good things, not the bad. These are things which will divert us from the most important – to that which is merely interesting and time-consuming.

Charles Colson once reflected, “It is not what we do that matters, but what a sovereign God chooses to do through us. God doesn’t want our success; he wants us.”

Let us look at the three aspects of the psalm:-

The psalmist focuses upon **The Nature of God (v.v.1-4)**

The psalmist exercises and commends the life which encourages that **We have hope in God (v.v.7-8)**

We are then drawn to understand **The benefit of living our lives in God and his service (v.v.11-12)**

In exploring the breadth of these themes within one psalm, the writer is able to focus upon his own experience and yet not be oblivious to the stubborn nature of those who he describes as his enemies.

We can all too easily be distracted from God’s purposes and the very best intentions of life, if we fail to learn the lessons of this psalm that begin with a focus upon God.

### **The Nature of God (v.v.1-4)**

Throughout the psalms we are introduced to aspects of God’s character or nature. In so many ways, we are shaped by our understanding or otherwise of God. I am so grateful when people choose to allow their understanding of God to lead them into a life of service.

I think I also need to say that there are many people who do not openly declare the Christian faith, but who choose to give their time and talents very generously in the service of those who need a helping hand. I have often discerned the presence of God in the lives of those who have not acknowledged him themselves.

The very different emotions that are expressed in verses 1 to 3 are all in relation to requests that God would hear our words or groans. So this tells us that God is One who is willing to hear the deepest cries of human experience.

The ‘cry for help’ which the psalmist makes clear (v.2) is placed within the context of the fresh opportunities which God gives to us every day (v.3).

When I think of those who volunteer across the whole work of Wesley Mission, the most significant aspect of this service is that it meets people at their point of need. There are aspects of volunteering that cannot be fulfilled by staff members. In this service, we recognise the importance of those contributions.

The use of the personal pronoun “my” in verse 2, somehow bridges the gulf between the Almighty God and our human service. There are some within the orbit of the Christian community who never really grasp the humanity of God’s nature at this very practical level.

Some people’s understanding of God is not actually based upon love. Johnny, aged 5, was told by his mother that he must finish his breakfast porridge. He said he didn’t want to. His mother replied, “You must finish it. If you don’t, God will be very angry.”



She went into the kitchen to wash up, leaving Johnny looking with determined obstinacy at the porridge. Outside it was raining and suddenly there was a loud clap of thunder. Johnny's mother came back into the room and found him eating his porridge as quickly as he could, and muttering to himself, "All that fuss for a bowl of porridge!"

Martin Buber was an Austrian-born Jewish philosopher who lived most of his life in Germany. If I were to look back at my college notes, they would surely remind me that his main emphasis was on something he described as "the I-Thou relationship" between ourselves and God.

It was Buber who wrote, "Of course God is the 'wholly Other', but he is also the wholly Same, the wholly Present ... he is nearer to me than my I." Our understanding of God must be lifted from the mysterious to the everyday and, when we do that, we will find ourselves able to respond to him.

### **We have in God (v.v.7-8)**

Having approached God in his morning prayers, the psalmist has established grounds of confidence in approaching a God who takes no pleasure in evil. This love which we discover in God through Jesus Christ has two sides to it.

Firstly, we affirm that it is incompatible with evil. But it is demonstrably characterised by what Gerald Wilson, in his commentary, called his "relentless goodness towards his creation and all who live in it."

This concept of relentless goodness I find helpful, for it suggests quite clearly that God's only intent was and still is to bless his creation. It was the same thought that was reiterated by John in the First Epistle: "*God is light; in him there is no darkness at all.*" (1 John 1:5) This particular context in the New Testament leads on to talk about the great themes of forgiveness and reconciliation.

God's holiness offers sinful humanity both its greatest problem and the grandest of hope. Whenever we live in accordance with God's will or live out the practicality of service which pleases him, we punch great holes in the darkness of selfishness, to let the light in.

This hope never disappoints us and leads us into a place of real relationship with God – and, here at Wesley Mission, we understand this kind of life to be something that introduces people to God.

When John Wesley was on his difficult journey to faith, he shared his sense of anxiety about whether he should continue to preach and be active in what he at the time considered to be his life of discipleship. Peter Bohler encouraged him, even in the midst of his experience, to preach faith until it became fully part of his experience.

I never cease to be amazed at the number of people who begin their search for God in the practical arena of service. For that reason, I am encouraged in the context of our Volunteers' Recognition Service to affirm two truths:-

We should maintain a place of real opportunity for people of all kinds to be engaged in volunteering; whether it is in the corporate sector, where there is an increasing emphasis upon corporate social responsibility – or in the life of churches and those who have retired from paid employment.



I am also encouraged to believe that the Christian community not only should offer the opportunity to people to volunteer, but also some context within faith in which such volunteering can be understood.

When people came to the Temple to offer prayers, they knew that a wide variety of people would be part of this experience. The priests would not be able to distinguish between the godly in heart and the godly in appearance.

Just a couple of weeks ago, I had to attend an early morning breakfast at one of the commercial companies in the city. I suppose because it is part of my nature, I arrived in good time.

I sat in a lounge on the ground floor and noticed that there was a receptacle where people could leave their umbrellas. As I moved to the appropriate floor, I was ticked off on a list and given the regulation badge of identity.

Then finally when reaching the room where the address was to be given over breakfast, my name was once again checked. We live in a world where far too much of this scrutiny has become part of our everyday living. The great thing about volunteering is that it gives opportunity for all to find a place where they can express in a creative way their gift of volunteer service.

Having once lived in Europe, I have been to Amsterdam on a number of occasions and a highlight of any visit to that great European city is to travel along the canals, but also to visit where Anne Frank and her family were holed up in an attic above the printer's shop during the terrible days of occupation.

As you may know, her diaries were saved, even though she and her family members were taken to a concentration camp. Those diaries, which were later published, tell a wonderful story of bravery and a willingness to see the best in the worst of circumstances – and all written by a relatively young girl. She wrote, "It's really a wonder I haven't dropped all my ideals because they all seem so absurd and impossible to carry out. Yet I still keep them because in spite of everything I still believe that people are really good at heart."

"I simply cannot build my hopes on a foundation consisting of confusion, misery and death. I see the world gradually being turned into a wilderness. I hear the ever-approaching thunder which will destroy us too. I can feel the sufferings of millions and yet when I look up into the heavens I think that it will all come right; that the cruelty too will end and that peace and tranquillity will return again."

"In the meantime, I must uphold my ideals for perhaps the time will come when I shall be able to carry them out."

I refer to this not because I believe we have no understanding or belief in the reality of sin and selfishness, but that it can be shattered by acts of love and genuine contributions in the world around us.

### **The benefit of living our lives in God and his service (v.v.11-12)**

The theme of taking refuge in God is very powerful in the final two verses of the psalm. The benefits of living our lives in a way that is generous towards others are enormous.



It is our conviction as Christians that this relentless goodness of God will never allow evil to have the last word. We might also add, it will never allow selfishness and introspection to be the final word.

For many people, life is lived with uncertainty and, because of this, it is important that we lay out a pattern of life that enables us to put our trust and hope not in 'the swirling press of circumstance' but on the unchanging sovereignty of God.

The great conclusion of this psalm rests upon the fact that God deals graciously with people. One writer concluded his thoughts on the psalm in this way: "Perhaps the most important lesson contemporary humans can take from this psalm is that human hope is grounded in the essential character of God – a character that is constant and does not change regardless of the ebb and flow of human circumstances."

We realise that the symbol of Christianity is the cross, but we must avoid making that cross a beautifully polished emblem, but see it for what it is – a splintery cross over which is draped a towel of service.

Leo Tolstoy brought his own wisdom to bear on this theme when he wrote, "The simplest and shortest ethical precept is to be served as little as possible ... and to serve others as much as possible."