

Change and Transition - Third Session

We thought that we would begin our time together with a short discussion based on Psalm 139. You may want to spend some time meditating on the psalm before we meet.

“Psalm 139 is a prayer to the God who knows our every thought, word and deed, from whom there is no hiding, who has been privy even to one’s formation in the dark, concealment of the womb.” (NIV Study Bible notes)

V1-6 God who is all seeing

“God you know me perfectly, far beyond my knowledge of myself; my every action, my every undertaking and the manner in which I pursue it, even my thoughts before they are crystallised and my words before they are uttered” The divine knowledge is not merely comprehensive, missing nothing, capturing everything. It is personal, active, discerning, sifting and searching. As Derek Kidner says in his commentary on this psalm – “If one’s first reaction to this is the wonder of v6, one’s second may be the urge to escape, which appears to animate the next stanza.”

V7-12 God who is all present

There is no hiding place from God. He cannot be escaped, His Spirit and His presence are always with us (v7). He is present with us in all of creation – from the height of the heavens to the very depths (v8), from the furthest east to the furthest west, there is nowhere we can go that God is not with us (cf Romans 8v38-39). Even darkness cannot hide us from God; night is as day and darkness as light to Him (V11-12).

V10 “...even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast.” This describes God’s inescapable care over our lives as He watches over us in love. This is the pivotal verse of the psalm for us, that even though at times we might feel like escaping God, we might feel confused, “in the dark” about the way ahead, His love and care are inescapable. He will never forget or abandon us and He is committed to guiding us and holding on to us.

V14-16 God who is all creative

“For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb.” “We are fearfully and wonderfully made.” The one who made us so intricately and knows us so intimately is the one who guides us and leads us into His plan for our lives. “All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.” (v16)

How does God guide us and lead us into New Beginnings?

We said at the beginning of our discussions that “Without a transition a change is just a rearrangement of the furniture.” And that “The transition itself begins with letting go of something that you have believed or assumed, some way you have always been or seen yourself, some outlook on the world or attitude towards others.” Also “We have to start with *endings*, letting go of whatever it is time to let go of, before we can make *new beginnings*. (Bridges)

We have unpacked the transition process discussing endings, the neutral zone and the concept of new beginnings. We have considered some of the implications of facing the possible losses of our hopes and expectations and the impact of transitions within the context of marriage and family life. During this third session it may be useful to consider what could guide and help us on this journey of making new beginnings.

The promises of God

Making new beginnings always takes faith and courage. Think over times of change and transition in the past, how did God guide you? What promises of God helped you to trust Him and gave you courage to step out in faith. If you feel able, come prepared to share one or two verses and how they have encouraged you to trust God in making a new beginning.

A sense of calling

Do you have a sense of calling on your life now, or as you look back was there a time when you did have that sense of calling but it has dimmed or been lost somewhere? Are there key verses that anchor that calling for you?

In the extract from the book “How to finish the Christian life well” that we sent out for the first session, the author refers to our primary and secondary callings as believers – “As a Christian, our primary calling is to follow Jesus. We are called to know, love and serve the Lord. That is the primary purpose of our life.” He then explains that our secondary calling is the particular career areas where we can best use the unique passions, gifts and abilities that God has given us to serve Him.

In Gordon MacDonald’s book “A Resilient Life” he writes a chapter on listening for the call of God. The following are some extracts from that chapter:-

“People who are resilient live by the gravitational pull of a call. They believe that God’s hand is upon their lives and that they must respond to that call. Thus resilient people reflect on questions such as, *what path should my life be taking, and what should I be doing with the resources and sensitivities with which God has blessed me?*”

“I believe that big picture thinking - at least for the bible believer - demands a sense of call. Heaven imprints the heart of a person with a destiny that provides meaning and focus to life. There must be in most people a deep instinct to hear such a call, to feel that we can align our lives with a higher sense of purpose than just the routine of daily living.”

“It would be hard to read through the Bible and not conclude that *call* is a significant transaction between God and people who believe that He is involved in earthly matters. Thus strategic thinking will have to begin here: *What do I hear God saying about the direction of my life and its contribution?*”

“A call, it seems to me, comes about in several ways.

First: Heaven speaks! The ways of speaking? Many and varied. But there is a moment of certainty that God has put His hand upon a person and nudged that individual toward a particular people, theme or function.

Second, the genuineness of a call is usually, though not always, confirmed by others, who discern the unique work of God’s spirit in a particular person. People who know us well watch, and they volunteer comments such as, “You glow when you’re doing that. You are at your best when....You seem so natural when you’re.....

A third part of the authentic call seems to be giftedness. There are some romantic (and probably true) stories of calls where a person started off with no specific capacities at all, but that is probably rare. With a call comes giftedness—that mysterious empowerment of capability and spirit that God

visits upon the “callee”. When such people are in alignment with their calls they fairly soar. Something powerful happens, and we the observers are all left in amazement.

Finally there are the results themselves. As I do what I do, does the world around me become a bit better of a place? Are people encouraged by my presence? Does an institution or a business become a better place to work because of my contribution? Do I add something to the human equation in my home, at my job, in my neighbourhood, in my church?

Men and women have obeyed God’s call and become martyrs. Others have undertaken unspeakably difficult discouraging tasks and barely survived. Many more have lived the relatively common life between home and job. They hammer the nails, sell widgets, create software, or fix things. But in the process they make a difference in the existence of the people around them. And they, too, are called.”

Spiritual Discernment

Tony Horsfall’s book “Mentoring for spiritual growth, sharing the journey of faith” has some helpful insights into this means of seeking direction and how it results from a heart surrendered to God, the Holy Spirit’s work in us and prayer. These are some quotes from the chapter on “A sense of direction: The gift of discernment”

“The gift of discernment serves as a compass for spiritual travellers. It helps them to navigate their way through a multiplicity of choices and options. It enables them to recognise and choose the right path when they might otherwise be confused.”

He goes on to say – “The definition that comes closest to summing it up for me suggests that discernment is seeing the heart of the matter with spiritual eyes; seeing God’s point of view; seeing beyond the surface events, beyond the immediate and transient.

Discernment in a broader sense comes as a positive inner feeling that something is the right thing to do, or equally a strong interior sense of unease, suggesting something may in fact be wrong. Paul experienced this as he considered where to go during his second missionary journey (Acts 16:6-10), he would have pressed on into Asia, but ‘having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word there’, he turned his attention to Bithynia. However, ‘the spirit of Jesus would not allow them to’ so they waited. Then the vision of the man from Macedonia and the conclusion that this was indeed where God wanted them to go.

Since discernment is primarily a gift from God, we should not be surprised to see that it is normally given to us in the context of prayer. It is our humble dependency upon God that moves us to seek for his wisdom.

It is worth saying too, that discernment comes most easily when we are fully surrendered to God and open to doing His will, whatever that may be. We will find discernment difficult if we have predetermined ideas of what God should do, or if we set conditions about what we will or will not do. Only when we have offered ourselves fully to God, and when our minds are being renewed, will we be able to ‘test and approve what God’s will is’ (Romans 12:2).

Through the process of discernment we are seeking to be led into the right path, the way of truth and love. We need discernment to understand our own hearts, to interpret what God may be doing in our lives and decide the best course of action at moments of transition.” He goes on at this point to describe the role of the mentor on this process but we will come to that later.

“Associated with the process of discernment is the belief that when we recognise and choose God’s leading, our hearts will become peaceful, settled and quiet. This is often based on Colossians 3:15 which speaks of the peace of God acting as ‘umpire’ in such situations. It is of course possible to deceive ourselves and to be ‘at peace’ about a wrong course of action, especially if it is one we are determined to pursue anyway. This is where the objective presence of a mentor can save us from self- deception. Generally speaking we can assume that, if we are truly open to doing God’s will, whatever that may be, we will experience a deep inner harmony between our thoughts and our feelings when we have made the right choice. This is the kind of alignment (or interior stability, as it has been called) that Paul speaks about following the deliberation of the council of Jerusalem in Acts 15: ‘It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us’. Even if the decision is a costly one, there will be peace, and even if we encounter difficulties along the way, the inner assurance will remain.”

Role of a spiritual mentor in guidance

In Horsfalls’ book “Mentoring for spiritual growth” he includes a helpful section on the value of mentoring during a time of transition. The following extracts are on page 87:-

“The value of having a soul friend or mentor is often most keenly felt at times of change and transition when the need for companion-ship on the journey is acute. Likewise when we have key life decisions to make can be occasions to seek out the objective counsel of a trusted friend or guide, someone whose advice we respect and who will help us to weigh up all the options and possibilities.

One lesson I have learned over the years is that the will of God is actually a very broad place. I used to think that guidance was like walking a tight-rope – there was only one possible way to go, and if you made the wrong choice you fell off into God’s second best. This meant for me (and for many others) guidance was always a stressful business, because you could easily get it wrong and miss your way, which might prove disastrous. I now realise that we can be much more relaxed about guidance because God is committed to revealing His will to us and helping us walk in His ways. In fact the responsibility for guidance lies with Him, and He is well able to make His will perfectly clear to us. For our part, the key ingredient is to place ourselves in the position where we can be led by the Spirit. It is more about preparing our hearts, offering ourselves to Him for whatever He wants, and then doing what seems right. As long as we truly want to please God, we can trust our hearts to guide us.

Some will have been brought up with a mistrust of their own desires, concluding that if we really want to do something, it must be wrong, because it is likely to be us who want it not God. Another way of looking at it, though, is to recognise that our deepest desires have been placed there by God, and as we uncover and respond to them, we are in fact discovering the will of God. In creating us, God has placed His own desires onto our hearts. It is part of the way He has made us, how He has uniquely shaped us, and we do His will by becoming the people He made us to be and daring to live from our hearts. This is confirmed by Psalm 37:4 ‘Take delight in the Lord, and He will give you the desires of your heart’.

People will instinctively be drawn to a mentor when they are in the process of transition, leaving one phase of life and about to enter another. This will often centre on a possible career change or development in ministry.

Weighing up the pros and cons of possible moves requires the process of discernment we have already spoken about, and having someone to accompany us as we work through that process can be a great help.”

He goes on to explain the role of such a mentor:-

- To be there to listen and point the person to God so that they have a spiritual perspective on all that is happening.
- To be there through the process of transition, walking with them on the slow journey, which can take as long as two years.
- To encourage reflection on the past, and the integration of the lessons learned into the present and the future.
- To help them to grieve for what is past, and to face the realities of the present, while having hope for the future.
- To help with the process of discernment in the many choices that have to be made.

It is easy to see why people value the ministry of spiritual mentoring so highly. We all need people to inspire us and to call us on to greater things, people who will share with us from their experience and help us to grow. Sometimes we need a listening ear, someone to share our troubles with, a shoulder to lean on when we feel hard pressed, a shelter in times of storm. Occasionally we will want someone to walk with us through our times of uncertainty or to help us to choose wisely in moments of opportunity.”

Identifying gifts, strengths and passions

Part of the watching, listening and learning of the neutral zone was to understand ourselves better - what motivates us and energises us, what are our gifts and strengths and how can they best be used in our future contribution. One of the ways that might help to do this is to create a time line divided into blocks of five or ten years. Starting from childhood, try to identify:-

- When were the times that you experienced fulfilment, success, enjoyment and motivation?
- What were the interests, occupations, hobbies or goals that really motivated you?
- When did you feel that you were really succeeding, achieving and energised?
- When did you feel that you were flourishing as a person and your efforts were fruitful by their results?
- When did you feel that you did something, perhaps with a degree of success, but with little enthusiasm and it just seemed like hard work?
- What did you have a go at, but it resulted in disappointment or failure?
- When did you feel frustrated and like the proverbial “square peg in a round hole”?
- When did you feel that you were working from your strengths and doing that for which you were created, in the right place, fulfilling God’s assignment for you?

Our memories of the past can be influenced by other things- the environment at the time, the people around us and their influence upon us or other things going on in our lives that might colour those memories. But look for trends and themes that might reveal those interests that really motivate you, those dreams as yet unfulfilled, those talents and gifts yet to be given the opportunity to flourish. As Bridges said “This is the chance to begin a new chapter.”

“It is crucial that we affirm in this place the trust and hope that the One who made us will in due season disclose the gift of new direction and restored purpose and energy.” (Fowler)

“Part of learning to trust the Spirit of God in our spirit is to trust that what we most deeply and truly yearn for, has something profoundly to do with what God wants for us.” (Fowler)

“May the God of Hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in Him.” (Romans 15:13a)

