

## **Mr Magoo Spirituality - Learning to live in a world that you cannot see, Burton Community Church, Sunday 16th August 2009**

When I was young I loved to watch cartoons on TV. One of my favourites was Mr Magoo. Mr Magoo was an old guy with really bad eyesight, I mean really bad! He had enormously thick glasses but even with them he couldn't see a thing. The joke about Mr Magoo cartoons was that his eyesight was so poor he ended up in the most incredible situations, but he would be completely unaware of it.

For example he would decide to take his dog for a walk around the block. He would mistake a doorway for a street corner, go inside enter the elevator, go to the top floor and emerge on the roof of the building - still thinking he was at ground level and walking round the block! He would then walk around the building ledge - by this time a crowd would have gathered below and be screaming and shouting.

He would get to the corner of the ledge and step off into thin air. At that very moment a crane driver - there was always a crane driver! - would swing a steel girder into his path and he would continue walking along it. He would get to the end and another crane driver would swing a concrete pipe into his path and he would walk along inside it. Still thinking he was walking along around the block, humming to himself and quite at peace with the world!

Eventually he would be placed so he stepped off onto another roof and he would walk into the elevator, go down to ground level, exit the building and return home. Still having no idea of the death defying situations he had been in!

Why do I recount that story? I do so because we ARE Mr Magoo. We are living in a world we cannot see.

The Bible tells us that we are living in the middle of the most intense spiritual battlefield. God, the angelic beings and Christians are in a merciless conflict against Satan, the spiritual forces of darkness and the demons and humans who side with Satan against God and against good. This battle is for our souls, the control of our lives, our marriages, our families, our churches, our villages, our nations, our world, our cosmos.

We are living in the middle of a battle we CANNOT see! We are living in a world that is hostile to our faith.

**WE ARE LIVING IN A WORLD THAT WE CANNOT SEE!**

How can we live successfully in such a condition? How can we live safe and successful lives in a world that we cannot see?

If you think of a blind man faced with the challenge of crossing a busy road, he has two choices. He can take a chance, trusting to his hearing and hoping for the best, or he can get someone who can see to guide him safely over.

In effect this is what faith is. Faith is acknowledging that we cannot the world we live in and

choosing to be guided by someone who can see - God.

*Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see ... And without faith it is impossible to please God*

[Hebrews 11vv1, 6a, NIV]

What do we HOPE for? For all that God tells us about the reality of our existence - that we have significance, that we are loved by God, that our lives matter, that Jesus died to save us, that Heaven awaits us, that Satan is defeated, that God honours us by involving us in His plans for the eternal establishment of His Kingdom.

What do we not SEE? The spiritual consequences of the actions God tells us to do, the plans and resources God has to meet our needs and to bring a good resolution to situations that look hopeless when God calls us to take a step of faith and obedience.

Faith is -  
HEARING God SPEAK  
and BEHAVING as if it were TRUE

Taking God at His word, in Scripture and in specific situations when God indicates something that He wants us to do.

Ordinarily we are sure of what we have and certain of what we see. So what God wants to do in our lives and in our thinking, is to totally re-orient them to the supernatural realm. He wants us not only to live in the natural realm but also to live in the supernatural realm. To be aware more and more of the spiritual realities of our lives and situations.

This is not an optional 'extra' for Christians with a special calling, or a specific gifting. This is FOUNDATIONAL for ALL Christians. We see that it is IMPOSSIBLE to please God unless we can learn to live in this way. We don't even get started on the Christian life unless we start to move into this way of thinking and acting. The whole success or failure of our lives hinges on whether we become people capable of living in a world that we cannot see.

This is a fundamental reversal of the normal human way of living and being. This is the central content of Christian discipleship, being transformed into this new kind of being.

The reason we need this process is because we are fallen creatures, damaged by sin. As a result we have lost much of our capacity for spiritual perception. God has therefore prepared for each one of us a training program for the perception of the spiritual. The whole process of the Christian life is the recreation of our lost spiritual capability. We are called to embrace a process of fundamental transformation in order to become a different kind of being. No longer will we live simply in the natural realm, but we begin to open ourselves up to the spiritual realm. We take as seriously the spiritual dimension of life as we take the physical. In fact it is the spiritual dimension that we prioritise because it is the spiritual that is the most important, which gives us the clearest, truest picture of reality. Thus "We live by faith, not by sight".

*Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands. Meanwhile we groan, longing to be clothed*

*with our heavenly dwelling, because when we are clothed, we will not be found naked. For while we are in this tent, we groan and are burdened, because we do not wish to be unclothed but to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life.*

*Now it is God who has made us for this very purpose and has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come. Therefore we are always confident and know that as long as we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord.*

*We live by faith, not by sight.*

*We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord. So we make it our goal to please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it. For we must all appear before the judgement seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due to him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.*

*[2 Corinthians 5vv1-10, NIV]*

Human Beings were created to have a relationship with God. That is the primary reason for our existence. Therefore the success or failure of our lives hangs on whether or not we achieve that relationship. Anything else that we might want to achieve in life is totally irrelevant in comparison to having a relationship with God. It is the ONLY reason that we exist. If we fail in this then our whole life is a failure - no matter what else we might accomplish or achieve in other areas. If we don't come into relationship with the God who made us and loves us and longs for us, then we fail. Full Stop.

Now if this is the case and Hebrews 11v6 is true - that it is impossible to please God without faith - then faith is crucial and foundational. If we can't live in a way that pleases God without faith, then the success or failure of our lives hangs on whether or not we become people of faith. So this is a serious issue.

Over the next few weeks you are as a fellowship going to spend some time studying this crucial aspect of the Christian life. What I want to do today is to give a general overview of the subject of faith to stimulate your thinking in this subject.

## 1 The Origin of Faith

Where does faith come from? If we need to get faith in order to succeed in our human existence it is important to know where it comes from and how we can access it. Let us look at a few key verses;

*Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.*

*[Hebrews 12v2, NIV]*

*For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no-one can boast.*

*For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.*

*[Ephesians 2vv8-10, NIV]*

These passages show us clearly that the "author" of our faith is God. Faith has its origin in God, it is a gift that we receive. Here these verses refer primarily to faith for salvation, the faith that enables us to believe in God, the faith that enables us to recognize Jesus as God incarnate, the faith that enables us to respond to Jesus', life, death and resurrection for our salvation etc. But faith in all its forms is the same.

We note here also that faith needs "perfecting", it needs to grow and develop. This growth and deepening of our faith also has its origin in God. But we are not passive in this process. We need to co-operate with God. We do this in recognizing our need for increased faith and in crying out to God that He might grant us this faith and then stepping out and exercising that faith.

*So they brought him. When the spirit saw Jesus, it immediately threw the boy into a convulsion. He fell to the ground and rolled around, foaming at the mouth. Jesus asked the boy's father, "How long has he been like this?" "From childhood," he answered. "It has often thrown him into fire or water to kill him. But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us."*

*"If you can'?" said Jesus. "Everything is possible for him who believes."*

*Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!"*

*[Mark 9vv20-24, NIV]*

If ever one verse or statement summed up the whole of the Christian experience, it is this little phrase of the boy's father in this passage. *"I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief."* This is the whole of Christian discipleship.

*"I do believe"* - Enough to believe that God exists, enough to believe in Jesus, enough to come to faith in him as our saviour and Lord, enough to try to live our lives in relationship with Him and by his standards.

*"Help me overcome my unbelief!"* - But this saving faith is not yet sufficient to face every challenge of life. Daily we face an intense struggle to live by this faith, to live it out. We face a succession of instances, moments, decisions, choices, opportunities where it is so hard and painful to have the faith to do, or to say, or to be what God calls us to do, say or be. So we cry out in prayer to God, *"Help me overcome my unbelief!"*

Such a powerful phrase. Both a statement of faith and a prayer. An affirmation of the faith we have already received in order to believe that God exists that He loves us that He calls us into relationship with Him. But also a prayer that expresses our heartfelt acknowledgement of our total dependence upon God our need for His help. A cry from our heart that God would grant us more faith, that we might be able to live in a way that pleases Him.

## 2 The Development of Faith

From the previous example we see that faith is always incomplete and that it needs to grow and deepen with each crisis that we face. The boy's Father had a certain amount of faith. He had the faith to acknowledge Jesus as a man of God, as a prophet, perhaps even as the Messiah, but his faith wasn't sufficient to believe that Jesus could heal his spiritually troubled son. He had to cry out for the gift of more faith to enable him to respond to this new challenge. This is the same for each one of us.

The following verses help us to see the dynamic nature of faith. Faith should not be static, but should grow and deepen as we progress in the Christian life.

*We ought always to thank God for you, brothers, and rightly so, because your faith is growing more and more, and the love every one of you has for each other is increasing.*

[2 Thessalonians 1v3, NIV]

*Neither do we go beyond our limits by boasting of work done by others. Our hope is that, as your faith continues to grow, our area of activity among you will greatly expand,*

[2 Corinthians 10v15, NIV]

The consequence of this is that Christians have different levels of faith and it varies over time. To some God grants great faith and they are expected to use it, to others lesser faith has been given.

*We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith.*

[Romans 12v6, NIV]

We also have to live sensitively in community with people who have different levels of faith.

*Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgement on disputable matters.*

[Romans 14v1, NIV]

However, as faith is dynamic, it can decrease as well as increase.

*Timothy, my son, I give you this instruction in keeping with the prophecies once made about you, so that by following them you may fight the good fight, holding on to faith and a good conscience. Some have rejected these and so have shipwrecked their faith. Among them are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan to be taught not to blaspheme.*

[1 Timothy 1vv18-20, NIV]

So a key feature of the Christian life is going to be the regular (corporate and individual) examination of where we are in terms of the life of faith. Are we making progress? Is our faith deepening and expanding as we face challenges positively? Or is our faith diminishing and weakening?

*Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realise that Christ Jesus is in you— unless, of course, you fail the test? And I trust that you will discover that we have not failed the test.*

*[2 Corinthians 13vv5-6, NIV]*

The obvious question that presents itself in all this is, "Why doesn't God just give us all the faith we need in one go?" Why can't we just get a mega "hit" of faith at the moment of conversion which will allow us to live out our Christian lives in total faith without any effort?

The answer is, of course, that God's primary calling for us is to live in relationship with Him. How does God encourage us to turn to Him, to open our lives to Him, to prioritise our relationship with Him? It is through allowing us to experience circumstances where we need His help.

It is a general rule in human experience, that we only turn to God when we have no other source of help. God tends always to be the "last resort" for human beings. Thus God is often forced to use difficult circumstances to encourage us to turn to Him, in order to develop that relationship of faith and trust between us and God.

Those of you who have been through the incredible "Experiencing God" study course will know that it does a very good job of explaining this process and showing its essential place in the Christian life.

If you remember the steps in the cycle of experiencing God you will remember that one of these steps is "God speaks" - He calls us to do something beyond our capabilities. Then we face the next step, the "Crisis of Belief" - can we trust God to do what He has said He will do? Only when we respond in faith, showing this by "Adjusting our Lives" to what God has revealed and then by stepping out in "Faith and Obedience", do we come to "Experience God" in a deeper way. This is the "mechanism", or "recipe", for the development of faith.

A sign of Christian maturity is the ability to turn to God earlier and earlier in the crisis of faith moments. In fact not to wait until things become crisis events, but to turn to God daily, hourly even, asking for the faith and the grace to live our lives in a way that pleases Him.

As a personal testimony I would say that I don't find that faith gets any easier as time passes, but I do find that I get through the crisis more quickly than before. I recognize more rapidly that what is happening in my life is a crisis of faith event, and I manage to get to the point of expressing my faith in God sooner and committing myself to walking His way more rapidly. But it never gets easy!

However, as we experience God at work as we step out in faith in response to His call, it gives us confidence to do this again the next time it happens. It is always a challenge, but it becomes a smaller challenge. We gradually build faith in our lives. Eventually faith becomes more and more

the normal or natural response to events. The process of transformation is taking hold, we are becoming spiritual beings who walk by faith, not by sight.

### **3 The Challenge of Faith**

*This is what the LORD says: "Cursed is the one who trusts in man, who depends on flesh for his strength and whose heart turns away from the LORD. He will be like a bush in the wastelands; he will not see prosperity when it comes. He will dwell in the parched places of the desert, in a salt land where no-one lives.*

*"But blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD, whose confidence is in him. He will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green. It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit."*

*[Jeremiah 17vv5-8, NIV]*

The Bible presents us with a stark choice, to live with faith in God or without faith in God. A life lived with faith in God is a life lived in the supernatural realm. This allows us both to know the blessing of God in our lives and also to become a source of blessing for others. Or we can refuse God's invitation to faith and choose to live our lives solely in the physical, natural realm. This leads to a life that is spiritually barren, empty and desolate, of no value to God, to ourselves or to others.

#### **3.1 The Curses of Trusting in Man:**

The above text highlights the fact that when we think we can live our lives without God, we will. This will inevitably lead to our side-lining of our relationship with God, a coldness of heart and a loss of passion. This is the loss of the blessing of obedience. Above and beyond this will be the curses of disobedience. These are the remedial responses of God to disobedience, unpleasant experiences which are designed by God to bring us to our senses and to turn us back to Him.

#### **Curse 1 (v6a) Spiritual Destitution**

God uses a picture familiar to the desert peoples of Palestine to explain the difference between trusting in man and trusting in God. He describes someone who trusts in man as being like a bush in the desert wasteland.

The wilderness is a tough place to live. The resources which support life are in short supply. Life exists on a knife-edge. Very little thrives or does well, it is a place of existence, not abundance.

Such is the image that God uses to describes people who trust in man. They are like desiccated, scrub bushes barely managing to eke out a survival existence.

The word translated 'bush' actually is an unusual word which appears only twice in scripture. In the other place where it appears it is translated 'destitute'. This is the core idea of the word. 'Lacking the means of subsistence', 'totally impoverished'. It speaks of isolation from the place where the means for abundant life can be found i.e. ultimately from God, or at a secondary level, from the community of his people.

The only other place where this word appears is in Psalm 102:17.

*"He will respond to the prayer of the destitute;  
He will not despise their plea."*

This is a wonderful expression of the heart of God. In God even the place of 'destitution' is meant to become the place of 'restitution'. If only we turn in prayer and repentance to God.

### **Curse 2 (v6b) A Place of Barrenness**

Parched places - no growth, no fruit, no development, no improvement. All effort to achieve any of this is wasted. A curse of unfilled potential. On the side of a mountain in Provence, France I saw oak trees which were very small with trunks no bigger than a man's arm, yet they were decades old. The reason being that there is very little rainfall, and what little there is runs straight off the mountain without soaking in. So trees that might have been lush, mature oaks were scrubby little bushes, so dry and brittle that a man can break off a branch with his bare hands. What a contrast to the mighty English oaks I remember climbing in my youth.

A salt land - Land of no use, no value, a specific curse of the covenant (Deuteronomy 29:23-25).

### **Curse 3 (v6b) Sidelined by God**

You will not see prosperity when it comes - God will bless and work through someone else. You cannot thwart the purposes of God but you can place yourself outside of them.

If we therefore sum up the curses God places on his people when they choose to direct their lives on the basis of 'trusting in man', we have a somewhat sobering picture.

We have the picture of a man or a woman growing cold and distant in their relationship with God. As they focus more and more on the human means to achieve the vision they have chosen and planned for themselves, they look less and less to God for his input into their lives. The passion cools, the flame grows smaller, the light dims.

We also see a spiritual 'withering' in their lives. Where once we saw the shining presence of the Spirit of God in their actions and attitudes, we now see a cold dullness. We see less and less of the fruit of the Spirit (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, self-control). We actually see the saddest thing that one can ever see in the life of a Christian - ordinary human-ness.

Furthermore, we see a failure to live up to their spiritual and human potential. We see people who should be leading, but who are still following. We see no growth, no development, no change. What we also see is an increasing spiritual fragility. The slightest thing seems to knock them out of whack in their relationship with God and the community of believers.

We also see a person who is not being used by God to impact the lives of others. A person who is of no help, no blessing, no strength to others. We see uselessness personified. It lives, it breathes it walks - but it achieves nothing in the kingdom of God.

### 3.2 The Blessings of Trusting in God

We now move to a much happier consideration. What happens when someone places trusting in God at the centre of their lives?

Again God uses a picture drawn from nature to explain what trusting in God is like. The background is the same as before, a desert landscape. The metaphor is much the same, a tree. The person who places his trust in God at the centre of his life is compared to a tree in the desert wilderness, but a tree planted beside a life-giving stream.

The first thing to note is that the outward circumstances of those blessed and cursed are the same. The same harsh environment exists with its heat and drought but they don't have the same effect on those in different relational circumstances with God. Why? Because those in a relationship of trust with God have access to the resources they need to face the difficulties, to endure them and to overcome them.

*This is love for God: to obey his commands. And his commands are not burdensome, for everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world? Only he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.*

*[1 John 5vv3-5, NIV]*

#### **Blessing 1 (v8a) Access to Life-Giving, Life-Sustaining Resources**

The first blessing of having trust in God at the centre of our lives is that we now have access to resources we never had access to before. The tree sends out its roots into the moisture laden soil. The deeper they go, the greater the vital force they can draw upon.

As we 'put our roots down deep with God' we too develop our capacity to draw strength from him. This is one of the reasons why God allows those trusting in him still to face the difficult conditions of desert life. If you plant a tree in well watered soil its roots stay shallow. They don't do the hard work of digging down deep, they don't need too. But such a tree is in a potentially dangerous condition. Should drought come it has not the capacity to draw from the deeper, more secure reserves of water in the ground.

It is a spiritual principle that times of hardship draw us closer to God.

*Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.*

*[James 1vv2-4, NIV]*

Therefore God allows difficult times to come into our lives to encourage us, even to force us to go deeper with him. To grow and deepen in our understanding of him and our love for him. Then when hard times come, our faith does not wither and die under the onslaught. We draw deep from God, we stand firm.

Another encouraging consideration is the greatness of the resources available to us. How big are God's resources? Infinite. Therefore what difficulties can we face with Him? Anything

*I can do everything through him who gives me strength. [Philippians 4v13, NIV]*

### **Blessing 2 (v8b) Freedom from Fear in Difficult Times**

Be assured, that on this earth we are living 'in the desert'. This is our time of pilgrimage, we are not in the safety of our eternal home. Therefore we can be certain that times of intense heat will come. But we can also be confident of God's resources helping us to endure it. Fear is the opposite of faith. If you are trusting in God, if your life is in line with God's will, then there is no room for fear. Whatever the circumstance, whatever the trial. You can make it with God. The tree's leaves are still green. The heat doesn't harm.

### **Blessing 3 (v8c) No Worries in Times of Drought**

Drought is a blight on all living things. In such times access to water, the very basis of organic life, is stripped away. But the one who trusts in God can face even this circumstance. You won't 'dry up' in times of drought because your needs are not being met through external circumstances, but through the resources of God. It is the relationship with God that sustains. As Jesus said,

*"Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent."*

*(John 17:3, NIV).*

It is in knowing God that the very basis of eternal life exists. Our very relationship with him makes death a non-event. As God cannot die, neither can any being with whom he has a relationship. Our place in God's heart is our guarantee of eternity .

Above we considered how drought can be an incentive to growth. In times of drought plants push their roots down deeper into the soil. What this means spiritually is that we can actually emerge from these times of difficulty not weakened but strengthened.

*Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father?*

*If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons.*

*Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live!*

*Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness.*

*No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.*

*[Hebrews 12vv7-11, NIV]*

Such is the amazing economy of God that the worst of times can leave us strengthened not weakened, enriched not impoverished, advanced not retarded.

#### **Blessing 4 (v8d) Consistent Fruitfulness**

We see that the negative outward circumstances have no negative effect on the fruitfulness of the tree. This is the opposite of the natural world. As someone who grows his own vegetables I can attest that you can normally only expect fruit when all the external circumstances are beneficial e.g. temperature, rainfall, soil conditions etc. However, for those trusting in God, they can be fruitful under the most disadvantageous conditions.

I have found this to be true in my own experience. I have noticed that it is often whilst undergoing trials that people make the most spiritual progress, evidence the most divine grace, and impact others the most significantly for God. I have seen many instances when people, instead of emerging from difficult periods spiritually crippled, emerge spiritually strengthened, with new maturity and a greater depth. Remember Joseph's reflection on the horrible experience of betrayal by his brothers and of years of slavery in Egypt.

*You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.*

*[Genesis 50v20, NIV]*

In conclusion the important fact to note in this picture of the believer as a tree beside a life-giving stream, is that he is meant to be fruitful. Note that the tree produces both fruit and leaves all year round. A supernatural constant fruitfulness.

In scripture fruit speaks of food. Leaves speak of healing, as they were often used in medicines. So the healthy believer, out of his relationship with God, becomes both a source of sustenance for those who surround him and a source of healing.

It is important to realise that both food and healing are for the benefit of others, not for the benefit of the tree itself. We live to serve God and to be used by him to bless those around us. Our obedience leads to others being blessed. As the fruit of the Spirit is increasingly seen in our lives God can work through us to build and strengthen his Kingdom.

#### **4 Psalm 23 - The Hymn of Faith**

*The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want.*

*He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he restores my soul. He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.*

*Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.*

*You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.*

*Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.*

*[Psalm 23, NIV]*

This psalm is a statement of faith for the whole of human life - cradle to grave. As such it has

always had an enormous place in Christian spirituality.

The psalm uses the analogy of a sheep's relationship of trust in and reliance upon its shepherd to speak of the relationship that we need to have with God. The confidence and trust we can place in our Good Shepherd every single day of our lives, right until the moment of our death.

The psalm speaks of the provision of the necessities of life, of security for rest, of restoration (after times of stress, illness, or mistakes), of guidance in the right path of life.

The psalm goes on to recognize perhaps the most deeply unpleasant fact of human existence - its shortness. Each one of us has a limited amount of time on this planet. We will all grow old, get sick and die. Death is something we face personally at the end of our life - although the threat of it may visit us at several moments of crisis. We also face death in a secondary way in the lives of those around us, or presented to us on our TV screens.

How then can we face up to the fearful unpleasant reality of death? The psalmist asserts that God will be with us as we face this final enemy. He will guide us through this, as He has guided us through every other moment of life. Death is a valley we pass through, not a destination.

If we consider the structure of the psalm we see that it has a mirror-like quality. The first verse is reflected in the last. The second verse is reflected in the second last etc. This type of literary structure is used in Hebrew writing in order to focus attention on the folding point at the centre. It is here we are to find the centre of the psalm, its high point, its focus. So we see that the key idea the psalmist wants to convey in this psalm is found in verse 4 - "*I will fear no evil, for you are with me*".

This is the essential truth that the psalmist wants to communicate, that a life with God is a life without fear, from its inception to its culmination and then on to its ultimate fulfilment in eternity.

This is re-enforced by the somewhat exaggerated image of God feasting us and anointing us as our enemies look on powerless to do anything about it. Perhaps it is not a very pleasant image, it certainly clashes with the love for enemies that we see commanded elsewhere in Scripture (e.g. Leviticus 19vv17-18, Exodus 23vv4-5, Proverbs 24v17, 25v21). But the psalmist is just making the point, he is using the most powerful image he can imagine to show just how great God's ability is to provide for us, to sustain us, to protect us. Thus the most terrifying scenario he can imagine - being surrounded by his enemies - becomes the setting for God throwing a party for him! God showering him with blessings, God honouring him as his friend. I think it's meant to be funny, it is meant to make us smile. It is like the psalmist saying "Why are you scared? Why are you fearful? This is the level of security you have in God! You can even be surrounded by your worst enemies and God can throw a party for you and bless you right in front of them and they can do NOTHING about it! Bring it on!"

## Conclusion

In conclusion I just want to remind you that there is no such thing as an ordinary Christian life. Every day is a challenge to live in the supernatural realm. Every day is a step forward, or a step backward in God's program of transformation, in our ability to live in the supernatural realm.

What we do each day is not that important. Even if all we do in a day is mow the lawn and wash the dishes, we can choose to do it in God and for God and with God. The most mundane activity can be and should be a spiritual act of worship. I encourage you to read "The Practice of the Presence of God" by Brother Lawrence if you want some practical guidance about how to do this. This is our challenge and our calling as Christians - to become transformed into spiritual beings through the living of everyday life with God.

From time to time there will also be crisis moments. Times when God challenges to take a step forward in developing our level of faith. In these times we need to cry out, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief" and to then move out in faith and obedience to God's call.

May, at the end of our lives, each one of us be able to say in the fantastic words of Saint Paul;

*I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day —and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.*

*[2 Timothy 4vv7-8, NIV]*