

Daniel Series Part 10

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[0 : 00] I wonder, how many friends do you have?

And in mentioning or in posing the question about friendship, it's almost inevitable that a reference will be made, perhaps it's not inevitable, but I'm going to do it anyway, to a distinction perhaps between Facebook friends and real friends.

You maybe have hundreds of Facebook friends, I don't know. But how many real friends? Of course, that provokes a question, what is a real friend anyway?

How would we define what is a real friend? I want to think about this theme of friendship this evening. I know that's what the young folk who have been away for the weekend have been considering.

And so I want to, in a sense, carry on with the theme. I don't know what you heard or what was said, so I hope there won't be too much in the way of overlap. I'm pretty sure there won't be. But I do want to just continue with the theme of friendship, and particularly friendship with God.

[1 : 16] The psalm that we have sung from beginning to end, and very particularly verse 14, speaks of this reality, of this possibility that is laid out for us of enjoying friendship with God.

And I want to think about what that verse in particular says on this matter. Now, I'm conscious. Again, I'm speculating.

But I imagine that those who have been away for the weekend and have joined us this evening have had maybe very few hours of sleep. Now, maybe I'm completely wrong in that supposition. And to show what a sensitive fellow I am, my intention is to have finished everything at the very latest by the hour. So I don't know what you do if I haven't fulfilled that promise.

If you can snore or, you know, stamp your feet, whatever you think is appropriate, just to remind me. But don't start now. That would be, that would just be rude.

[2 : 19] So, but that's my intention. So we'll see how we get on in fulfilling that promise. Well, let's read again in Psalm 25, and very particularly verse 14.

Psalm 25 and verse 14. We read there, the Lord confides in those who fear Him. He makes His covenant known to them.

Now, as I pointed out before we sang that verse as part of our second singing, I pointed out that you could note as you sung that in our Psalter, in the Sing Psalms version, the language used is slightly different.

It speaks of friendship with God. And really the word there that is being translated in different ways is a word that in our text here is translated in terms of confiding, the idea of God confiding with those who are His friends.

and some translations choose to use the word friendship. And both are possible. Just to give you an example, and we'll come back to this in a moment when we're trying to explore a little more just what is being said.

[3 : 38] But to give you an example of how this verse is alternatively translated, in the English Standard Version, which some of you will have probably noticed I'm quite partial to, this verse is translated in this way.

So rather than the Lord confides in those who fear Him, we have this translation, the friendship of the Lord is for those who fear Him.

So the theme of this verse is about friendship with God, a friendship that God expresses in a particular way, by confiding in those who are His friends.

We know that that's a feature of friendship, isn't it? The possibility of being able to confide in those who are your friends. You trust them, you're close to them, and so you can say things to them that you wouldn't say to others.

And that is one of the privileges of friendship, to be able to confide in somebody. And so here, God's friendship finds expression in this way, that He confides in those who are His friends. [4 : 55] Just to maybe develop it a little in terms of how this verse has been understood in other times or by other translators, those who are familiar with the authorized version will perhaps remember that in this verse the word used is, the secret of the Lord is with those who fear Him.

But it's the same general idea, isn't it, of confiding. Of course, the word secret does introduce maybe a kind of mystical element that is maybe not really present, but it's the same basic area of meaning.

The Lord confides in those who fear Him. The Lord grants His friendship, or the friendship of the Lord is for those who fear Him. So let's spend a brief time this evening learning together about this wonderful possibility of friendship with God.

And we're going to do so by asking and answering three questions concerning this verse before us. First of all, and very briefly, who are the Lord's friends?

We're given an answer, certainly part of the answer to that question here. Who are the Lord's friends? But then the second question, which is really at the heart of the matter for us this evening, who does the friendship, or sorry, what does the friendship of the Lord involve or look like?

[6 : 22] Well, what does it mean? What does it look like to enjoy friendship with God? And then finally, what can I do, what can you do to cultivate and experience this friendship, as we will have at least in a measure described it?

First of all then, who are the Lord's friends? Well, the psalmist is clear. The Lord confides in those who fear Him. The friendship of the Lord is for those who fear Him.

The answer then, as I say, is very clearly and explicitly set out for us. The Lord's friends are those who fear Him.

It's easy enough to make that statement because it's there before us, but I think there are two things that we need to say concerning, first of all, the meaning of that. What does it mean to fear the Lord? But also the place of fearing the Lord.

What place does that have in this relationship? And in a moment I'll explain what I mean by that.

But first of all, the meaning of this phrase, to fear the Lord. Well, to fear the Lord is to respect Him.

[7 : 31] It's not to be afraid of Him. That point has been made often, but it is worth repeating. It's not about standing in trembling, a fear of His punishment.

Though no doubt there is a place for that, depending on what our behavior has been. But the fear of the Lord essentially is about respecting Him. We could put it this way. It's about taking God seriously.

To fear God is to take God seriously. It requires a knowledge of God that is born of a relationship with God. You simply can't fear God in the sense meant by the word as used in the Bible if you do not know God.

But as we get to know God, as we get to know who God is, as we get to know what He is like, the God of all power and majesty and glory, the God who is holy and pure and just, the God who is gracious and merciful and loving.

As we get to know God, so we are drawn to fear God, to respect Him, to be concerned about what He thinks of us.

[8 : 39] To fear God, it has been memorably put, is to dread His frown and to cherish His smile. That is the language of somebody who is in relationship with God and who is fearful of His frown, who fears His disapproval, who fears His disappointment in us.

And yet one who also cherishes the smile, the approval, the well done, my faithful servant of God. So that gives us an inkling of the meaning of this phrase, to fear God.

Remember that the Lord's friends are those who fear Him. But the second thing I said I wanted to just note here is the place of fearing God in this relationship. What I mean by that is this.

Fearing God is not and cannot be, in the light of what we've just said, the condition for, but rather is the evidence of, friendship with God.

I'll just repeat that because it's very important. Fearing God is not the condition for friendship with God. It is the evidence of friendship with God.

[9 : 51] God does not come and say to you, well, if you want to be my friend, if you want to enjoy that privileged position of being my friend, well, you must fear me. And I'm going to see just how much you fear me.

And if you meet the mark, if you fear me enough, if you respect me enough, if you honor me enough, well then, okay, you can be my friend. That's not the picture being painted at all. Rather, this honor of God, this respect for God is evidence that we are friends. That is the thing that friends of God do. Indeed, we could say that the degree in which we fear God will be the degree in which we enjoy the friendship here described.

So if feeding God is not a condition that we need to meet in order to be friends, not a box that needs to be ticked so that we can become friends with God, it does rather beg the question, well, how then does this relationship begin?

If this is evidence of an existing relationship, well, how does the relationship begin? Well, the Bible is clear on this point also. It involves putting your trust and hope in God.

[11:06] In this very same psalm, the psalmist repeatedly makes this point, in you I trust, oh my God, he says there in verse 1, and he continues, no one whose hope is in you will ever be put to shame, and we could repeat the examples even with this one psalm.

The relationship with God, this friendship with God begins as we put our trust in Him. And in the fuller light of the revelation that we have in the New Testament, we learn to appreciate that that trusting in God involves putting our trust in His Son, Jesus Christ, as our Savior and Lord.

As we put our trust in Jesus and would trust in Him as Savior of us and as our Lord, so a friendship is forged, a friendship that is evidenced in the manner in which we treat Him, in the manner in which we fear the God with whom we enjoy this relationship.

So that's really all I want to say concerning this first question, who are the Lord's friends? But moving on to the central concern, what does this friendship involve? What does this friendship involve?

Now what we're going to say clearly, we are going to concentrate on just a few words in this verse 14, it's not going to be an exhaustive presentation of what is involved in friendship with God, but it does address one central plank.

[12:33] Well, what does the verse say? As we consider this matter, what does this friendship involve? What does it look like? Well, there are two ways of understanding the verse, as I've already suggested in the alternative translations that I've shared with you.

And these two translations do give us, in a sense, the two main ways of understanding it. I want to just compare and contrast them just very briefly, and then draw out what I think to be the message of the verse on this matter.

What does this friendship look like? In the English Standard Version, as I mentioned before, the verse is translated like this, the friendship of the Lord is for those who fear Him, and He makes known to them His covenant.

This way of translating the verse suggests that the psalmist is presenting two distinct, though connected, privileges granted to those who fear the Lord.

What are these two privileges that are granted to those who fear the Lord? Well, one is friendship, and the other is knowledge. The friendship of the Lord is for those who fear Him, comma, and, suggesting another thing, and He makes known to them His covenant.

[13:49] He grants to them knowledge concerning His covenant. So, two privileges of those who are friends of God, or rather of those who fear God, His friendship and knowledge that He grants to them.

However, what the verse would not be telling us, if that is the way we understand it, is what the friendship looks like. We're left intrigued, or somewhat in the dark, as to, well, okay, we have friendship with God, but what is that?

What does that look like? What is it that I will experience as a friend of God? But if we think of the verse as we have it in the Church Bible, and so I would direct your attention there, so it's very clear. I think the manner in which the NIV translate it on this occasion is more helpful in explaining to us this matter of friendship, because there we read, the Lord confides in those who fear Him. So, though the word friendship isn't used, the evidence of this friendship, this confiding, is stated clearly.

The Lord confides in those who fear Him, semicolon, He makes His covenant known to them. So, it seems to me what the psalmist is saying is this.

[14:58] The Lord confides in those who fear Him. It begs the question, well, what does He confide? What does He confide? What are these precious secrets that He confides in His friends?

Well, He goes on to tell us. He makes His covenant known to them. God confides in those who fear Him, but what does He confide?

Well, He confides this. He confides His covenant. The friendship of the Lord finds expression in this way. He makes known to His friends, to His confidants, His covenant.

I wonder, how does that grab you as an explanation of what this friendship involves? Friendship with God involves certainly one aspect of it, that God makes known to you, His covenant.

Is it perhaps a bit of an anticlimax? Were we expecting something a little bit more exciting as an aspect of God's friendship? The Lord, we're told it would seem, expresses His friendship by making known to us some legal document that regulates His relationship with His people, His covenant, this contract that He has established.

[16:13] He confides in us by sharing with us a long list of rules and regulations, His laws and decrees. Maybe we think, well, that's not so appealing.

I would have liked to think that friendship with God was something a bit more attractive. Well, let's just think about this a little more. What is it at heart that God confides to us in making known His covenant?

We could call them love secrets. We use the language of the AV, the secret of the Lord is with those who fear Him. Love secrets. Because you see, at the heart of the covenant is the loving heart of God.

The covenant is the means whereby God enters into and protects a loving and saving relationship with His chosen people. We know that one of the central covenant ceremonies in the Old Testament was the Passover.

And what was the Passover? Well, it was a celebration of God's loving deliverance from death, the angel of death that was striking down the firstborn in Egypt, and those whose doors, the lintels of the doors had been painted with the blood of the covenant lamb, of the Passover lamb, were protected.

[17:38] And so, as the people of Israel remembered that day, as they celebrated this covenant ceremony, they celebrated God's loving salvation from death and indeed from slavery in Egypt.

The means by which they were delivered, the sacrifice of the Passover lamb. So, when we think of God confiding in us, of God expressing His friendship with us by making known to us His covenant, we have to remember that the motivation for this covenant is God's love for us.

And when we think of the pivotal act of covenant faithfulness on the part of God, God enters into this relationship with His people and commits Himself to His people, even though we are a stubborn and rebellious people, how is this commitment of God, how does it find expression in the most pivotal and wonderful way?

Well, we know. It found expression in the most wonderful and significant way and central way when God sent His only begotten Son, when He sent Jesus to die as the covenant sacrifice, as the Passover lamb.

We read in Luke's gospel in chapter 22 the words of Jesus Himself. This cup is the new covenant in my blood.

[19:07] Jesus Himself, as He gathered the disciples around Him to celebrate the Passover, is conscious of who He is and what He is about to do as He is about to hand Himself over to death as the Passover lamb.

So, when God speaks here, even in this psalm, of showing His friendship to us, of confiding in us by sharing with us His covenant, God is speaking of His desire to confide in His friends all that He has done for us.

He wants to confide in His friends everything about His precious Son, Jesus, the one in whom He is. He is well pleased. Maybe you could picture what the verse is saying in this way.

God wants us to know His friendship. God wants to confide in us and so God would gather us round and He says, gather round, gather round, friends.

I have something I want to tell you. Gather round, listen well. Let me tell you about Jesus. Let me tell you about my Son. Let me tell you about how wonderful He is.

[20:17] Let me tell you about all that He has done for sinners. Let me tell you of His faithfulness to me as His Father of the manner in which He was obedient even unto death and death on a cross.

Let me tell you about Jesus. The Lord confides in those who fear Him. What does He do? He makes known His covenant to them. And of course, at the heart of His covenant is His Son's

sacrifice in the place of sinners.

So, this is what this friendship looks like. How does God express His friendship? Well, He confides in those who fear Him. He makes His covenant known to them.

But then finally, what can I do to experience and cultivate this friendship? to even use the language of cultivating a friendship recognizes that there are degrees of friendship.

We know that in life. We have friends who are very close, very intimate friends, and those who are less so. Well, equally, friendship with God knows of degrees.

[21 : 27] We can say that all believers, all those who are trusting in Jesus, are friends of God. But some are closer friends than others.

Is this because God expresses favoritism? Well, not at all. Rather, it's a function of how we respond to God's loving advances. God would be a close and intimate friend of all His people.

But some of us fail to take advantage of this great invitation that He makes. And so, we are distant friends. We are friends.

We are part of His family. Our eternity is secure by the grace of God, but our friendship is not one that we have cultivated. And so, it is not as close as it might be.

That is simply a description of reality. And so, we can speak of cultivating the friendship of God, of enjoying a deeper experience of that friendship.

[22 : 27] And to speak of cultivating that friendship is something that is relevant for all of us.

Perhaps there are those here this evening who have never entered into that friendship. Well, I would encourage you what greater thing can there be than to know friendship with God?

Perhaps there are those who are believers, genuine, sincere believers, and yet, you have never been very close to God. The opportunity is there for you, but you haven't made use of that opportunity.

I would encourage you to explore and to experience a closer friendship with God. Perhaps, many of us here can relate to this circumstance.

We look back and we say, yes, there were times when I was close to God. There were times when I enjoyed a more intimate friendship with my Lord, but that's in the past.

That is not my current experience. And so, I would encourage you to say, well, don't look back in a longing way as if those are days that are gone and will never return, but rather, take the opportunity to start afresh and cultivate this friendship with God.

[23 : 43] How can we cultivate this friendship? Well, I think the psalmist provides us an answer, at least gives us a very helpful hint in the following verse in what he immediately goes on to say.

In verse 14, he says, the Lord confides in those who fear Him. He makes His covenant known to them. And then what does he immediately go on to say? My eyes are ever on the Lord. My eyes are ever on the Lord.

The picture is of one who is expectantly looking upon God. The picture is of one who is hanging on God's every word. every word about His covenant, every word about His Son, Jesus.

And so, if we are to cultivate this friendship with God, if we are to enjoy what it is to experience God confiding in us and with us, then we need to fix our eyes upon Him.

We need to spend time with God. Much is said these days where the distinction is drawn between quality time and quantity of time. And we're told that all that really matters is quality time, even in our own relationships.

[24 : 50] Well, it's certainly important for us to spend quality time. But if we are to cultivate this friendship with God, and it's not just about quality, it's also about a measure of quantity.

If this was true of Jesus, who would rise while it was still dark, while He would spend a whole night in communion with His Father, if it was true of Jesus, then surely, for us also.

We must learn to certainly balance those elements, spending the time that needs to be spent to cultivate this friendship with God, and certainly that they would be a time of rich communion, quality time, if you wish, with God.

But also, this is not to be understood as an entirely individualistic pursuit, me and my friendship with God. But there is also the importance, as we would cultivate this friendship, of spending time with God in the company of God's people.

We're going to sing just in a few moments from Psalm 111. Notice that in verse 1, we have actually the very same word that we are considering here in Psalm 25, in Psalm 111, in verse 1.

[26 : 04] There we read, Praise the Lord, I will extol the Lord with all my heart in the counsel of the upright and in the assembly. Now, interestingly, the word counsel there is the same word that's translated friendship or confiding in in the verse that we are considering.

And the idea is of this counsel of friends, in the intimacy of fellowship, of fellow believers, we will worship God.

So the psalmist says, yes, I'm a friend with God, but as I'm a friend with God, I'm also a friend with those who share my faith in God. I'm a friend with those who, like me, would worship God.

And so the psalmist doesn't say, well, me and my God and that's all that matters. No, he cultivates his friendship with God in the company of God's people. And as we would spend time with God, listening to what He has to say about His covenant, listening to what He would share with us concerning His Son, Jesus, listening to what He would ask us to do in making known the good news to others about His Son, Jesus.

Well, as we would listen, so we must act on what we hear. We must act on what He confides in us, what He confides to you as you read His Word, as you listen to His Word explained.

[27 : 30] Indeed, the seriousness with which you will listen and act on what you hear will reveal the measure in which you fear God.

And so, in a sense, we come full circle. Who are the friends of God? They are those who fear Him. And as we would cultivate and develop and deepen our friendship with God, so the quality of that friendship will be revealed, will be evidenced in the seriousness with which we act upon that which He confides in us.

And as we fear Him, so we will take Him seriously. And we will take seriously what He confides in us, not only to warm us and to encourage us, but to spur us on to obedience and service.

Friendship with God. God offers us this friendship. The Lord confides in those who fear Him. The friendship of the Lord is for those who fear Him.

I trust that we would all be encouraged and challenged to develop that friendship, to enjoy that friendship, to experience that friendship in a deeper way as we respond even to what He has confided in us this evening through and in His Word.

[28 : 56] Well, let's pray. Let's pray.