

New Years Day Service

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[0 : 0 0] moment to the psalm that we read there in Psalm 67. 2015, what does the year hold? I have very little notion of what one day holds. Who knows what this afternoon or this evening might hold, and if you ask me about tomorrow or the rest of the year, well, I'm completely at a loss, and one day at a time, and as for today, I am just happy to begin the year gathered with God's people in worship, and also, if you'll forgive me for lowering the tone somewhat, hopeful that by the end of the afternoon, Aberdeen could be sitting proudly atop the premiership table. That may not be of any interest to many of you, but that would be a nice way to start the year. If you think differently, well, I respect your lesser opinion on this particular matter. So, the year ahead, what might it hold? Even in the absence of prophetic insight into what the year might hold, that does not mean that we must enter the new year wholly unprepared and devoid of any direction as Christians and as a congregation of God's people. I want to spend just a brief time considering Psalm 67 in the light of the dawning of a new year and identify five spiritual realities or priorities for us all to ponder on and grapple with as we begin and continue into 2015. Now, in the Psalm, I've identified five priorities. No doubt, depending on how you wanted to divide the Psalm up, you could do it in different ways, but there are five that I want us to think about briefly this morning, and I'll just mention what they are so that as we continue, you can have an idea of how we're getting on. So, the first thing that I want us to notice is our one great need to recognize. We're then going to consider our one great privilege to embrace. There will follow our one great responsibility to fulfill, then one great vision to own, and finally, one great certainty to hold. And so, these are the five things that I want to draw out from the Psalm, or certainly parts of the Psalm, this morning. Before we do that, I was noticing just this morning as I was looking at the news on the BBC website, our Prime Minister David Cameron's New

Year address, and in that address, he assures us, and I quote, 2015 can promise to be a great year for our country if we make the right choices together. Now, I suspect that these right choices have something to do with the general election that's approaching in this year, but I don't know if that's what he has in mind. I suspect he does. I didn't listen or read on to what else he had to say, but I was struck by that statement that in and of itself is one that we could echo, and maybe if I could paraphrase it for ourselves, 2015 will be a great year. We don't even need to qualify that by saying it promises to be, but 2015 will be a great year for our congregation if we establish the right priorities together. And that's what we are going to try and do with the help of this Psalm this morning. So, the first thing that I suggested we could draw out, and it is a very appropriate place to begin, is one great need to recognize. Where does the psalmist begin in this very familiar psalm? May God be gracious to us, or as it is sometimes translated, and I think in the older versions, may God be merciful to us. May God be gracious to us. May God be merciful to us. Our one great need to recognize as believers is that we are needy men and women. We are all sinners in need of God's grace. That has ever been so, and it ever will be so this side of eternity. That is our one great need. It was our great need when we first came to faith in Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior, and it remains our great need to recognize that that is who we are. We stand constantly and permanently and daily in need of God's grace, in need of God's mercy.

In the year that has passed, I'm sure if we were honest with ourselves, we would be able to recognize how our pride, our foolish self-sufficiency has robbed us of blessing, and indeed, perhaps even more tragically, made us incapable of being a blessing to others in the measure that we might or ought to have been. And so let us all begin here, recognizing this one great need. Let's begin 2015 in this place, in humble and realistic acknowledgement that we are sinners in permanent need of God's grace to forgive, to redeem, to restore. May God be gracious to us. May we know day by day as we walk, or rush, or stumble through 2015. The grace of God in the person of Jesus Christ, His Son, and our Savior.

One great need to recognize, may God be gracious to us. But then secondly, as we continue through the psalm, indeed continue through the first verse, one great privilege to embrace. One great privilege to embrace, because the psalm goes on, the psalmist goes on, may God be gracious to us and bless us and make His face shine upon us. Now there's no doubt, or certainly little doubt, that God's grace and mercy is in great measure the blessing the psalmist cries out for, as he recognizes his need of that grace and mercy. But there is more that he speaks of in this first verse. His cry is that the face of God would shine upon us.

May God be gracious to us and bless us and make His face shine upon us. Now there are, without any doubt, clear echoes in the language of the psalmist, of the words of the Aaronic blessing. We find in Numbers, chapter 6, the Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make His face shine upon you and be gracious to you. The Lord turn His face towards you and give you peace. The psalmist isn't quoting directly, but there can be little doubt that He is alluding to the words of that blessing. And in doing so, what He recognizes and what we can recognize is that this is our birthright as children of the living and true God, that God would make His face shine upon us. But what does that mean? The language is very intriguing. It's very exciting in many ways, but what does it mean? And I think we have to acknowledge that there is a depth in the very language employed that we will not this morning. Indeed, I would go further. I would say we cannot exhaust, but as we scratch the surface, I think we can discover that the language that the psalmist employs speaks of and points to the favor of God expressed in His graciously making Himself ever more known to us, His face shining upon us. God would have us know Him as our heavenly Father. He would have us, His sons and daughters, His children, He would have us know Him intimately. His desire for us is that we would walk an ever closer walk with Him. It was said of Moses that

[8 : 37] God spoke to Him as a man speaks with His friend. And this is the privilege, the manner in which that will be true, no doubt different to the manner in which it was true with Moses. But nonetheless, the reality of those words is a privilege that is extended to all of God's people. And may this be our experience in 2015, that God would make His face shine upon us, that we would know what it is to speak with God as a man speaks with his friend. But the language of God's face shining upon us also implies and requires a parallel, or perhaps more than parallel, a resulting activity, namely that we might reflect the face or person of God. The language of God shining upon us is language that implies this resulting action of us reflecting something of Him. As He shines upon us, so we reflect that which shines upon us. God has chosen to make Himself known to others through us as we reflect something of His beauty and His love. Now, in the light of what we discover in the New Testament, we can go further and speak not only of reflecting God, but as we are transformed into the likeness of Jesus, becoming more like God. And these realities, in a way, emerge somewhat in the light of a New Testament revelation. And this reality of us reflecting God, of us being the vehicles through which or by which God makes Himself known to others, brings us to our third spiritual reality. We've noticed our great need, or one great need to recognize, one great privilege to embrace, and the third reality is one great responsibility to fulfill.

And that great responsibility is that we might be of blessing to others. Notice how verse 2 begins. We'll take it from verse 1 to get the flow of what is being said. May God be gracious to us and bless us and make His face shine upon us, that your ways. This is a causal link here. The idea is so that your ways may be known on earth. This isn't a completely new thought on the part of the psalmist. This is the consequence that the psalmist anticipates of God being gracious to His people, of God blessing His people, of God making His face shine upon His people. The consequence, the result of that will be that His ways would be known on earth, His salvation, His saving power among all the nations.

We are forgiven. We are blessed. We are shone upon so that we, in turn, might make known the ways and the salvation of our God to others, to the nations of the world. This is our great responsibility.

This is the one great responsibility that we are to fulfill in the year that begins. We are blessed to bless. Now, this, of course, is nothing new. This God-ordered dynamic is to be found at the very heart of the covenant that God has established with His people, beginning with Abraham and with his descendants. Listen to the language that God employs that we have recorded in Genesis chapter 12 as this covenant is being inaugurated or established at the beginning. The Lord said to Abraham, leave your country, your people, and your father's household and go to the land I will show you.

I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you. I will make your name great and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and whoever curses you I will curse and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you. Notice these parallel realities that God identifies. I will bless you and you will be a blessing to others. I will bless you and through you others will be blessed. The nations of the world will be blessed. Now, when we read these words, very especially the final words there in verse 3 of Genesis chapter 12, and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you. Our minds and our eyes, quite rightly, are drawn and focused on the person of Jesus Christ. We know that this reality of the nations of the world being blessed through Abraham and through Abraham's descendants finds its ultimate fulfillment in Jesus Christ, in His life and work, in His saving work.

[13 : 40] All peoples on earth blessed through Him. And while that is true and it's right that we should focus on that, it would be wrong to conclude that we no longer have a role or a responsibility to be a blessing to others. We can't, if you wish, load all that onto Jesus and say, well, it's all through Jesus that that is fulfilled. True though that is in great measure. It is still true that as the children of Abraham, as God's covenant people, we are blessed by God that we might be of blessing to others.

Now, the manner that we are blessing to others is, of course, pointed to Jesus and making others known or make known to others who Jesus is and what He has done. But there is still on us this responsibility, indeed, this privilege of being of blessing to others as we are blessed by God.

So that's our one great responsibility to fulfill as we look ahead to what the year holds. But then in fourth place, let us notice one further priority, let's call it that, and that is one great vision to own. So far, we've really only looked at the first two verses, but in verses three to five, especially verses three and five, you have, the psalmist declaring the same thought, laying out, if you wish, the great vision at the heart of the psalm. May the peoples praise you, O God. May all the peoples praise you. May the nations be glad and sing for joy, for you rule the peoples justly and guide the nations of the earth. And then he repeats again what he had said in verse three. May the peoples praise you, O God. May all the peoples praise you. This was the great vision, great prophetic vision of the psalmist. He was looking forward to a day in the future for him where this would become a reality. It was not a reality as he declared it. It was this vision that he had, a God-given vision of all the peoples, all the nations, praising the living and true God. And this goes beyond simply acknowledging him to be God, important though that is. It speaks of those nations being brought into the very family of God, rejoicing in God, of becoming part of God's people. This is the great vision that he lays out and repeats on these two occasions at the very heart of the psalm. All the peoples praising

God. All the peoples rejoicing under his gracious and benevolent rule. Now we are privileged to live in an age of fulfillment when we can look around and witness the vision of the psalmist becoming a reality.

But the vision must also be one that we own and seek to make an ever greater reality. It is a vision that we can make a reality on our own doorstep in a city populated by the nations of the world. But it's also a vision that we can be involved in making a reality, this vision, as we pray for the work of the gospel in other lands, as we support that work in different ways, as we become involved in mission all over the world. And isn't it a fitting thing that even as we're gathered here at the start of the year, there's a group of our congregation in Ethiopia. Jesse, as we speak, is teaching a group of pastors there how to better interpret and study the New Testament, and some of our young folk helping in different ways. This is the great vision that we are to own all the nations, all the peoples, praising God as they are brought to acknowledge who he is and what he has done for them. One great vision to own. But then finally, let me just close by identifying in the psalm one great certainty to hold. Notice how the psalmist ends the psalm.

[18:06] If we read from verse 6, the land will yield its harvest, and God, our God, will bless us. God will bless us, and all the ends of the earth will fear him. It's striking the language that the psalmist employs concerning the future. You know, I began the sermon this morning by saying, well, I don't know what the future holds. I don't know what today holds. I don't know what the rest of the year holds.

There's a lot of uncertainty. I know that God knows, but I don't know. And yet the psalmist here speaks with such certainty. God, our God, will bless us. God will bless us. This is not the language of wishful thinking. It's not even the language of hopeful expectancy. It is the language of settled certainty. God, our God, will bless us. But it does rather beg the question, how can the psalmist be so certain? How can we presume to share his certainty? Indeed, can we presume to share his certainty?

Well, I think we can share his certainty. And I don't think there is any presumption on the part of the psalmist, nor would there be on our part if we were to echo these words and reflect these sentiments.

You see, his certainty is grounded in three realities that he alludes to, even in the few words with which he closes the psalm. And let me just notice these three realities that are the foundation for his certainty. I think the first reality that is hinted at, certainly in this closing verse, is what we might call God's track record. You see, he begins by saying, then the land will yield its harvest. Now, it's true that he's also looking forward. And yet, he's looking forward on the basis of what he has known to ever be true, that the land has always yielded its harvest, that God's people have always been provided for. And so, grounded in God's historical, gracious provision, the psalmist can look forward with confidence. He's always provided. He's always blessed us. He's always been good to us.

He's always been gracious to us. So, I look forward in the confidence that he will be in what lies ahead. And so, this settled certainty, God, our God, will bless us, is not wishful thinking. It's grounded in his experience of God, in the experience of God's people. But then also, even in this one verse, there's another aspect to his foundation for his confidence, and that is God's covenant commitment.

[20 : 52] You see, it's very telling how the psalmist, very deliberately, he almost clarifies the relationship that exists between himself as one of God's own with God. Notice how he expresses himself there in verse 6. And God, our God, will bless us. You know, I wonder if, as he penned the words of this psalm, and obviously we don't know what was going through his mind, but whether it might have been sufficient for him to say, and God will bless us. Of course, that would have been true. And yet, he deliberately pauses for a moment, even as he composes these words, and he clarifies matters. And God, our God, our God, will bless us. Why is it that I am so confident of blessing? Because God is our God.

He's my God. He's our God. He is a God who has committed himself to us. He is our Father. And so, He will surely bless us. He has the power to bless us. And as our Father, it is His desire to bless us.

So, why is the psalmist so confident? Why can he state categorically, God will bless us? Because, he can state God, our God, will bless us. So, his confidence is grounded in God's track record, in God's covenant and fatherly commitment, but grounded also, finally, in the declared purposes of God.

You see, he goes on to say there in verse 7, God will bless us, and all the ends of the earth will fear Him. The psalmist knows that God has already determined that this is what will happen.

All the ends of the earth will feed Him. All the peoples will praise Him. All the nations will recognize Him. God has declared that this is what is going to happen. And if He's declared that this is going to happen, then it will happen. And if He has determined that the manner it will happen is through the witness of His people, then it follows that He must bless His people, because it is as we are blessed that we then are a blessing as we communicate and share the good news of the gospel.

[22 : 59] And so, the psalmist can, with such confidence, declare, and God, our God, will bless us. And as we look ahead to the year that lies ahead, with all its uncertainties, there is one thing that is not uncertain, and that is that God will bless us. The manner in which He will bless us, the extent to which He will bless us, the manner in which our own conduct will impact on the measure of blessing.

And we recognize that that's an aspect to it. And all of that we recognize. But at the end of the day, we can be confident of this, that God will bless us. As we were thinking about even on Sunday, new every morning are His mercies, His compassions, His faithfulness. They never cease. And that is regardless of what we do and our conduct. Important though it is, of course, to live lives that are lives of grateful service to Him. So, one great certainty to hold. And God, our God, will bless us.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank You for Your Word. We thank You that as we read the words of the psalm penned so long ago, we are able to identify with the sentiments of a fellow believer, one in so many ways so different to us, brought up in such a different time and culture and circumstances. And yet, in the main things, we identify with one who is a believer as we are. And we thank You for that. We thank You that that allows us to turn to a psalm such as we have done and own for ourselves that which we read. And we pray that that would be true for us, that at the beginning of this year, these would be the priorities that we focus on, that we would ever be conscious of our great need of Your grace and mercy, that we would ever seek to embrace the privileges that are ours as Your people, that we would seriously and carefully seek to fulfill our responsibilities, that we would own that great vision of all the peoples of the world praising You, and that we would look forward to what lies ahead with that great certainty that You are a God who will surely bless us. And these things we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Well, let's close our service by singing that psalm that we've been giving some brief thought to this morning. Psalm 67, in St. Psalms, and we'll sing the whole of the psalm.

God, be merciful and bless us. Shine upon us with Your face, that the earth may know Your actions, and all lands Your saving grace. To the tune, High for a dull, and we'll stand to sing.

[25 : 50] Amen. God, be merciful and bless us. Shine upon us with Your face, that the earth may know Your actions, and all lands Your saving grace. And all lands Your saving grace.

O God, be the people's grace, may all peoples sing Your praise.

O God, be merciful and bless you. O God, be merciful and bless you. O God, be merciful and bless you.

Rejoice as one For among me The peoples praise you As they all United start Then the land Will give His harvest Wonderful His gifts And bright God our hope Will surely Bless us All the earth Will fear Our good The Lord bless you and keep you The Lord make His face shine upon you

And be gracious to you The Lord turn His face towards you And give you peace Amen Okay The Lord The Lord Let us know The Lord We will see The Lord