

Psalm 146

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[0 : 0 0] 18 days and counting. What's it going to be? A yea or a nay? Now this morning I have some pre-referendum advice to impart. I'm not going to hold back or pussyfoot around the issues, just some straight talking on what you must not do and what you must do. Now it may be that at this point some of you are just getting a wee bit nervous and you're thinking, so what is he going to say? Why doesn't he do the sensible thing and steer clear of this particular minefield? Well you'll be relieved to hear, or if you're mischievous, just perhaps a little disappointed, that I'm not going to tell you or even suggest to you how you should vote. I'm not even going to tell you how I plan to vote. I will tell you a wee story about a former minister of this congregation who was also, as it happens, my grandfather, the Reverend Duncan Leach. And Mr. Leach was being pestered on one occasion by one of his grandchildren. It wasn't yours truly, I hasten to add, but he was being pestered about his voting intentions. As I tried to work out when this would have been, I suspect it was the 1974 general election. For those of you who can cast your mind back that far. How are you going to vote,

Grandpa? How are you going to vote? was this insistent question that was being posed. And the interrogation was becoming just a little tiresome. And so my grandfather responded, so you want to know how I'm going to vote? Okay, I'll tell you. I'm going to vote by secret ballot. And that, I don't know if the grandchild in question even knew what that meant, but I think it shut him up, which was the intention of the reply.

Well, if I'm not going to suggest to you how you ought to vote or how you might vote, what pre-referendum advice have I got for you? Well, it's not my advice, but the timeless and always wise instruction of God's Word. On this occasion, as it is found in the psalm that we have read, Psalm 146. And in this psalm, there are two big messages, certainly two that we want to highlight given the context in which we are considering the psalm, two big messages that we would do well to remember in the midst of referendum fever. And the two big messages are these, don't trust in men and do trust in God. Don't trust in men, do trust in God. And that's it really, and we could maybe all go home. But just in case it's needed, let's look more carefully at the reasons given by the psalmist for not trusting in men and rather trusting or putting our trust, our hope in God. So, let's look at both of these pieces of sound advice that the psalmist gives us that God provides for us through this psalm. First of all, don't trust in men.

In verses 3 and 4, we have this very clearly and very eloquently put by the psalmist. Do not put your trust in princes, in mortal men who cannot sing. When their spirit departs, they return to the ground. On that very day, their plans come to nothing. Now, before identifying the reasons given, just note the scope or breadth of the warning or admonition we find in these verses.

It's clear that it applies to all men in terms of who are worthy of our trust, who we can put our trust in. The advice is given to all men, but it also concerns the foolishness of trusting in any men or women. But it's particularly focused, though it has that breadth to it, it's particularly focused on those in authority. Here, the language used is princes. If we think of the broad scope of the warning, first of all, we're told we are not to trust in mortal men. Do not put your trust in princes, in mortal men. In mortal men, a phrase that includes all men and women without exception. We are all mortal. The psalmist does not say that we should be careful to choose wisely the men we trust in, which we might have thought was sound advice. It is rather a pretty brutal blanket charge. Don't trust in any of them, or certainly don't put your trust in any of them. And I think there probably is an important distinction there that we might come to in a moment. Don't put your trust in any of them, in mortal men. But though it is, I think we can legitimately see a blanket warning, the psalmist does, and I'm sure this is his particular concern, he does hone in on one particular class of men we ought not to trust in, namely princes. Why the focus on princes, on rulers, on those in authority, be they men or women? Why that particular focus of the psalmist? Well, I guess because we are more prone or tempted to trust in those who are powerful, in those who are influential, in those who we imagine can do something for us, be it individually or as part of a collective. And we think, well, they have power, they have influence, then they are those in whom we could put our trust. They can get things done, and the things that we think need done. And so there's a particular temptation to put our trust in them. Hence, the warning has this particular focus. But what the psalmist makes clear is that we mustn't trust in them, however powerful, however influential that they may be. Now, if we bring this advice to bear on our current contemporary reality, that the warning is clear. Don't put your trust in rulers or politicians. If you're pondering on whether you should trust Alistair Darling or Alex Salmond or Cameron or

[6 : 53] Sturgeon, the advice is clear. Don't trust, or more accurately, don't put your trust in any of them, in any of them. Well, that's what we're told, but then it does rather provoke the question, but why? Why are we not to put our trust in mortal men? Why are we not to trust any of them, as the psalmist would seem to be indicating? Why? If we narrow it down to politicians, given the climate that we're in, why would you answer that question? Why do you think that it's not wise to trust politicians? I wonder how you would respond. I imagine if I were to go out onto Union Street and were to ask that question, I get a number of responses. Perhaps some would say, oh, well, they're all a shower of liars. They're all in the fiddle. They just say what you want to hear to get your vote. That's why it's not a good idea to trust them or to put our trust in them. I imagine some might respond in that way. Maybe that's something that you can sympathize with and say, well, yes, I can go along with those reasons. But is that what the psalmist says? Is that what the psalmist says here? Well, no, it's not what he says at all.

Curiously, the psalmist makes no reference to the honesty or otherwise of princes. He doesn't touch on whether they're honest or not. He makes no comment whatsoever in these verses on their moral character. This is not the big issue for the psalmist that explains why we ought not to put our trust in them. It's not about whether they're honest or dishonest. It's not about their moral character primarily. What he certainly doesn't do is he doesn't brand them all, all princes, all rulers, all authorities. He doesn't brand them all as liars and suggest that they're all as bad as one another, nor should we. The psalmist gives no grounds for indulging in a cynical branding of all politicians or rulers as beneath contempt. There is no justification for such an attitude in the words of the psalmist, though he is very clear that we ought not to put our trust in them. I imagine, and I'm indulging in some speculation, but I think entirely reasonable speculation, I imagine that the psalmist knew very well that there are good princes and bad princes. There are competent rulers and incompetent ones. Some lie through their teeth, and others are largely and commendably trustworthy.

We can largely believe what they say to us. Their track record allows us to have that opinion of them. So if it's the case that some princes at least, some politicians at least, are trustworthy in the sense of being able to believe what they say largely, why are we not to put our trust in them? Well, as we've already noted on the basis of these two verses, it's not principally to do with their moral character, but much more fundamentally it is to do with the limitations intrinsic to their human condition.

As men, we're told, they are mortal. As men or women, they are limited. And as men or women, they are dependent. These three realities that are true of any man or woman are highlighted by the psalmist as the reason why we ought not to put our trust in them. Let's just think about these three realities that are highlighted by the psalmist. Men are mortal. Do not put your trust in princes in mortal men. We will all die. In the immortal, if I can use that word, in the immortal words of Fraser on Dad's Army, we're all doomed. All of us, we're all going to die. We're all doomed to die. The most powerful and influential are each and every one of them fragile and vulnerable. In a moment, they can pass from time into eternity. And so it's unwise to put our trust in a man or woman who is here today and gone tomorrow. Hence, we ought not to put our trust in them, for they are mortal. But not only mortal, the psalmist recognizes that men and women are limited. Now, what do I mean by saying that men and women are limited? Or where do I draw that from in our text? Well, what I mean by this is that there are certain tasks that men cannot perform or help that they cannot provide. The psalm goes on to speak of the help that we need. And men, by their very nature, are incapable of providing certain kinds of help. There is that which is intrinsically beyond their capacity. Now, the psalmist gives one important example. He says that men cannot save. Do not put your trust in princes, in mortal men who cannot save. Now, politicians may be able to reduce the deficit. They may be able to create new jobs. They may be able to get waiting times down at A&E.; They may be able to do these things. But they can't save. That's something that is beyond their capacity. They simply can't do it. They can't save a nation that has turned its back on God. That applies to the United Kingdom, and it applies to Scotland indistinctly. And they certainly can't save a sinner without hope and without God in the world.

Hence, we are not to put our trust in those who, by their very nature, are limited. There are things they simply cannot do. Why not put our trust in princes? Because they're mortal, because they're limited. And I think a third thing we can draw out from what the psalmist says is that men are dependent.

[13:14] In verse 4, the psalmist speaks of the plans of princes. It's in the context of their mortality, but nonetheless, he makes reference to their plans. When their spirit departs, they return to the ground.

On that very day, their plans come to nothing. I just want to focus a little bit on these plans that princes conceive and hatch. Now, the psalmist makes reference to the plans of princes, but he makes no judgment on whether the plans are good or bad. Let's be charitable. It's always good to be charitable. Let's be charitable and imagine that the prince had great plans in mind. But is the execution of his plans, brilliant though they may be, is the execution of those plans wholly in the hands of the prince? Well, the psalmist is clear. There's a problem. His spirit departs, and the execution or the carrying out of his plans now depends on others. You know, he can put in his will, look, these are my great plans, and so when I go, you know, you guys carry on with these plans, but it's not in his power to ensure that that actually happens. And of course, that dependence on others is a reality even when death has yet to overtake our princes or politicians. None enjoy absolute power. Thank God. None enjoy the power to actually carry out all that they plan, brilliant though their plans may be. They may make a great effort at doing so, and in the measure that they're good plans, and in the measure that it works out, that's great. We can welcome that and celebrate that, but they're dependent on others.

Even a sincere plan or promise, as we can hear in abundance as we approach elections, be it a referendum or other elections, many plans, many promises, and some of them, no doubt, sincerely made, promises sincerely made. That won't always be the case, but there will be occasions when it is the case. But however sincere they may be, in the real world, those who make the promises don't actually have the power to carry them out, or certainly they're dependent on others to ensure that that happens. No doubt we could give examples, but for reasons of time, we'll leave that to you to identify examples. I'm sure they're not difficult to find. So don't trust in princes or politicians, not because they're bad people. They may be bad people or they may not be bad people. That's not the reason why you're not to put your trust in them. Don't trust in them because they are people. Not because they're bad people, but just because they're people. And the best of men are men at best. Mortal, limited, dependent. This then is what you must not do. What in contrast ought you to do? And really this should occupy our attention for a greater time, but it won't. Given the context, I did want to focus on this admonition and this warning not to put our trust in men. But of course we have to see this great contrast, this dramatic contrast that is painted in the psalm that while we are not to put our trust in men, we most assuredly are to put our trust in God. And from verse 5 through to the end of the psalm, this is developed. And we can consider what the psalmist has to say with the aid of two related questions. Who is this God we are to trust in and on what grounds can we trust in him? Who is this God that we are to trust in? Well, in verse 5 there are two parallel or complementary affirmations regarding those who are blessed or happy. And they identify the God in whom we are to trust. He is, to pick up from the text, he is the God of Jacob. He is also spoken of as the Lord his God. That is the God of the blessed man whose hope is in him. The God of Jacob, the Lord his God. You are to trust and seek your help in the

God of Jacob. This repeated self-designation of God as the God of Jacob is both revealing and hugely encouraging for the likes of us. Because it reveals a God who delights in associating himself with men and women. He's the God of Jacob. He associates himself with this individual called Jacob, this historical figure called Jacob. And God says, well, I am his God. I am the God of Jacob. God, the one in whom we can put our trust. He's not a distant, impersonal, creative force, but a personal God who enters into personal relationships. And just for a moment, ponder on the kind of man that he blesses with his friendship, Jacob. Now, Jacob was a nasty piece of work. He was an unsavory character. He was devious and underhand.

He was not a nice man. And yet God is not ashamed to give himself this designation, I am the God of Jacob. And the encouragement for us, the encouragement for you is that whoever you are, whatever you are like, however sinful, however unpleasant, however unlikable in your own estimation or in the estimation of others, you can put your trust and find your help in the God of Jacob. But he's also described in this verse or referred to in this verse as the Lord, the Lord his God, Yahweh. He is Yahweh. He is the God who is the personal and covenant God of Israel. This is the God who revealed his personal name to his own chosen people. This is the God who invites all to form part of his people and join at the family table. This is the God who has demonstrated his love and commitment to his people most powerfully and tenderly in the giving of his one and only Son to be our Savior. This is the God who can be most clearly known in the person of that self-same Son, our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. This is the God in whom we are to put our trust. So I would urge you, put your trust in this God. But I indicated that there's a second question as we consider the one in whom we can put our trust. And the second question very related is on what grounds, on what grounds can you trust in? And we've seen the reasons why it is unwise to put our trust in men. And they seem very convincing and cogent reasons. But what about the reasons for putting our trust, depositing our hope in this God? This is a huge question. It's a question we have to deal with every day of our lives. Can I trust this person? This person I'm thinking of marrying, can I trust him? Can I trust her? This employer, is he trustworthy? You know, can we trust somebody? It's a huge question. And it's certainly a huge question when it comes to depositing our hope for this life and eternity. And are there grounds for putting your trust in this God?

[21 : 00] Well, we've already begun to answer that question as we've considered who he is and the significance of his name and self-designation as the God of Jacob. But the psalmist goes on to give us multiple grounds for putting our trust in him. Now, we can only go on a whistle-stop tour identifying in the psalm, and just that, identifying the multiple reasons that we have to enjoy the sure confidence that our trust in this God will never prove misplaced. What does the psalmist say concerning this God? Well, he highlights his power. Having identified him as the God of Jacob, as the Lord his God, he then goes on and speaks of him as the maker of heaven and earth, the sea and everything in them. This is the God who is the one and only God, the creator of all that there is. This is a God who is able. This is a God whose power knows no limits. We don't need to be concerned that he won't be able to do something on our behalf, for his power is limitless. But it's not just that our God is a powerful God, but the psalmist goes on to identify him as a faithful God, the maker of heaven and earth, the sea and everything in them, the Lord who remains faithful forever. This is the great problem we have in human relationships. They begin, and it's all fine and dandy. We trust each other. Everything's going well, but then something happens.

The months pass, the years pass, and we're let down. And trust is broken, and we can't trust anymore. The trust doesn't last forever, but the psalmist says it's not like that with this God. His faithfulness is a faithfulness that remains forever. Whatever your circumstances, whatever you do to let him down, he will remain faithful to you, for he is faithful forever. What better ground could there be for putting your hope in him? His power, his faithfulness, also his justice. In verse 7, he upholds the cause of the oppressed. He gives food to the hungry. The Lord sets prisoners free. As we read what the psalmist says, we might think that this speaks of his love, and of course, it does speak of his love, but I think in the first instance, what the psalmist says in this verse speaks of his justice.

He looks down and sees those who are oppressed, those who are the victims of injustice, and he acts in their favor as the God of justice. Now, it is true that the timing in which he does these things is for us sometimes difficult to understand, but we can be assured that the God in whom we put our trust is a God of justice. He will always do the right thing. But of course, the psalmist also identifies his great love for those whom he helps. As he goes on in the following verses, in verse 8, the Lord gives sight to the blind. The Lord lifts up those that are bowed down.

The Lord loves the righteous. His love for us, his people, his love for those who put their trust in him is eternal and unmovable. But then the psalmist also identifies that the one in whom we put our trust is the one who reigns supreme, the one who enjoys absolute and sovereign power, the one whose ultimate victory over his enemies is secured. For the psalm continues, the Lord watches over the alien.

He sustains the fatherless and the wicked, but he frustrates the ways of the wicked. The Lord reigns forever. Your God, O Zion, for all generations. His purposes will never be frustrated. There will never be a circumstance where his good will towards us is frustrated by external factors, by third parties who make it impossible for him to do what he has promised. That's true of men. They make sincere promises. This is what we're going to do. And then when it comes to the reality, even though they want to, they can't. That's never a predicament that God finds himself in. His reign is eternal. His reign is supreme. And though there are many who oppose him, ultimately he is the one who frustrates the ways of the wicked.

[25 : 34] What a contrast with princes and politicians. And we gladly echo the conclusions of the psalmist, not only in this psalm, but elsewhere in the Psalter. Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the Lord our God.

They are brought to their knees and fall, but we rise up and stand firm. Or as he also declares on another occasion, it is better to take refuge in the Lord than to trust in man. It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to trust in princes. We have good reason to trust in God. You have good reason to put your trust in the God of Jacob and in his Son and our Savior, Jesus Christ. Have you? Have you put your trust in him? Do you trust in this God, the God revealed to us in the Bible, the Father of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ?

But we can't close, and we are coming to a close, but we can't close without noticing one more grand theme in the psalm. What do those who put their trust in God do? What is the unmistakable characteristic, distinguishing characteristic of those whose hope is in the God of Jacob? Indeed, if this characteristic is absent, the only reasonable conclusion is that such a man or woman is not trusting in God.

What is it? What is this distinguishing characteristic of those who trust in God? Well, the psalmist is clear. It is that they are those who praise God. He begins with these words of praise, praise the Lord in the Hebrew, hallelujah, and he ends with these same words, praise the Lord, hallelujah. This is what those who trust in God do.

They praise the Lord. This is what we do if our trust is in the God of Jacob. Praise that is ebullient and vocal. Praise that is deep and heartfelt. Praise the Lord, oh my soul. Praise that is permanent. I will praise the Lord all my life.

[27 : 50] I will sing praise to my God as long as I live. This is what distinguishes, this is what identifies those whose hope is in the God of Jacob. So again, I ask you, do you praise the Lord? Will you cry out, hallelujah? Does this cry of praise identify you above all else? Identity is one of the great issues that revolves around the decision that we need to take in a couple of weeks' time. In a measure, this matter of identity will influence our voting intentions. What is your identity?

Do we identify ourselves largely or even exclusively as Scottish? Do we identify ourselves as British? Or are we perhaps comfortable with a blended identity? We're all different in that matter. But the question of identity will greatly influence our opinions and our voting intentions.

Well, as believers in the Lord Jesus Christ, as disciples of Jesus Christ, as those who have put their hope in their hope in their hope in their hope in their hope in their hope in the God of Jacob, our primary identity is to be found in the one in whom we trust. We are citizens of the kingdom of God.

We are Christians. We are the Christ ones. Our hope is in Him. Our help comes from Him. And our praise is directed to Him. And so I would say to you this in closing. However you plan to vote on the 18th, please take seriously the instruction of God's Word.

Don't put your trust in men. Don't put your trust in princes. And do put your trust in the God of Jacob. Let's pray.

[29 : 55] Heavenly Father, we... kithree