

Psalms 90

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[0 : 00] Now, you'll not be surprised that I ask you to turn with me to Psalm 90. We've been singing from it, and we've read it, and now let's turn to it and hear what God would say to us on this last Lord's Day of another year through this wonderful Psalm. We'll read again verses 1 and 2.

Lord, you have been our dwelling place throughout all generations. Before the mountains were born, or you brought forth the earth and the world. From everlasting to everlasting, you are God. A few days ago, I bought an 80th birthday card that I want to give to an old friend who was an elder in one of my first congregations. Knowing this friend very well, I made sure that the card was not flamboyant, that it had the most sober colors I could find, because he doesn't really go in much for birthday celebrations. But I'm sure he'll be happy with the text from God's Word, that is one of the very few things that's written on the card. It's from Psalm 72, praise to the Lord forever, may his glory fill the whole earth. And as I bought the card, and I'll be filling it in or signing it, putting a personal message of greetings and of gratitude to this old friend. It brought home to me, of course, how our years, our lives are so marked by regular events.

This is the thought behind Moses' words in this psalm. Not just our birthdays, not just the fact that we've come to the end almost of 2015. But so much in all our lives, there are the children who were listening to their little talk earlier on. And for some of them, perhaps it's the first day they start school, five years old, and they go to school. For the other younger, young folk in the congregation, it's perhaps the day that they pass their last hires and leave school. Or perhaps it's when an apprenticeship finished, they were able independently to start work. Or perhaps getting their diploma or their degree and leaving college or university, starting the first job, getting married, paying a deposit on the first house. Or perhaps it's the first time that the death strikes the family and there is bereavement.

Or then the day of retirement. Or then perhaps the information that there is a terminal illness and that life will be drawing to its end soon. That's our life, isn't it? That's what Moses is reflecting on in this psalm, that God has brought us into this world and it's marked by all these different regularly events and it makes us conscious, it certainly should do, of the passing years. I've often wondered if Moses, when he wrote this psalm, he doesn't tell us when he wrote it. Was it at the very end of his life?

[4 : 23] Or was it perhaps, as I've often wondered, during his years in the desert in Midian? Forty years, every day the same as the day before. Going out with the sheep, looking for fresh pastures, guarding them against wild animals and against robbers and so on. How very different from the first forty years of Moses' life when he was so surrounded by the pomp and the prestige of Egypt, we're told by Stephen in his talk before he was put to death as a martyr, that Moses was learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians. And you can read a great deal into that comment. The status that he had as the son of Pharaoh's daughter. There's a tradition, who knows whether there's any truth in it, that Moses would be sent out as the leading general in Pharaoh's armies. But whatever the details are, what a contrast between these two parts of Moses' life. And it's no wonder that he is reflecting, as he does, on the passing of the years and on the unchangeableness, not of himself and his situation, but of the God who had brought him into being and the God that he was serving.

And so you find him throughout the psalm taking as his theme time, the creation of time, the passing of time, the ending of time. And that's what I'd like to do this morning, to notice how the first part of the psalm speaks of time and eternity. Time and eternity. But then Moses goes on from verse 7, he goes on to speak about time and judgment. Time and judgment. But he doesn't leave it at that, because he goes on in the psalm, particularly from verse 13 or verse 14 onwards, to speak of time and salvation. Yes, there's judgment. But there is a way, Moses says, to be freed from this judgment of which he speaks. So let's look at what God says to us through his servant Moses. And

as you and I, at the end of another year, also reflect upon time and how it affects us and how we should respond.

Here's Moses, whether it is that he's in Midian as a shepherd or whether it's later on when he's the leader of God's people going through the desert of Sinai. He's looking around him and he sees the mountains that surround those deserts, verse 2, before the mountains were born or he brought forth the earth and the world. In his very last speech, which he gave to the Israelites before he took the long journey up Mount Nebo, where he laid down to die in God's hands. In his last address to them, he speaks in Deuteronomy 33, verse 15, of what he calls the ancient mountains and the everlasting hills.

And I think we can understand, can't we, living here in Scotland, something of what Moses is saying there. The ancient mountains, the everlasting hills. Well, for us, of course, the Cairngorms have always been there. Our parents, our grandparents, our ancestors, as far back as there are records. [8 : 36] We look out to the North Sea and its rolling waves. It's always been there, always going to be there. It's always been there in the times of those who preceded us. But even as Moses talks in those terms, which we understand so well, he's recognizing that the longest life that could ever be lived, and his own was pretty long, 120 years he lived, that even the longest life and even the most ancient hills, they had their beginning. They were brought into being. Again, look at verse 2. The mountains, they weren't there forever. He talks about the everlasting hills. It's a figure of speech that he uses.

But God brought them into being. He brought forth, he tells us again in verse 2, the earth and the world. They are created. I'm created. You're created. We had our beginning brought into being by God, our creator. He alone is everlasting. And so we sang, both in the psalm and in the paraphrase, these wonderful words, from everlasting to everlasting, you are God. Or to put it in the words of the apostle Paul, writing to Timothy chapter 1, now to the king eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, the honor and glory forever and ever. For this God, the God whom we worship from eternity to eternity.

For him, a thousand years, Moses goes on to tell us in verse 4, a thousand years. They're just like a snap of the fingers, like yesterday when it is passed, because time itself is a created thing. It is a creation of God. In his own wisdom, for his own purposes, he, the eternal one, chose to bring time. And the creatures of time, you and me, he chose to bring these into being. He, by contrast, he's the timeless one. And we know the way he speaks.

The psalmist tells us here, from everlasting to everlasting, you are God, the eternal present. God, our eternal contemporary, no beginning, no end. And so, our Lord Jesus could say to the Sadducees who refused to believe in the resurrection or an eternal life, religious leaders though they were, he was able to say to them, listen, the God whom we worship, this is the God who said, I am the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, no past. I am always eternally present. Now, of course, for us, this isn't just difficult to comprehend. I confess that I just can't get my head around it, but nor can anyone.

It's difficult to comprehend. It's difficult to comprehend. It's difficult to comprehend. It's more than that. It is impossible for us to comprehend because we are creatures of time. Time was created. There's a, if it doesn't sound contradictory, there was a time when there was no time, and there is a time when time shall be no more. And if you and I were to grasp, even in the tiniest measure, the eternity of God and how time is a temporary creation of God, then I think we'd cease to be concerned to be concerned as we sometimes are with the great overarching truths of God's foreordination and election. God inevitably, because he's beyond time, God knows the end from the beginning, and God sovereignly ordains all things. And yet, we who are in time, we have to live as creatures of time. And a preacher, for example, while exalting as he must, the sovereign election of [13 : 36] Almighty God at the same time to creatures of time, like those who listen to him and like himself, as to say, you in time have to hear this message, and you have to make your decision with respect to Jesus Christ, as we'll see later on in this message. So, God, the God that Moses brings before us here, the God that we worship, is one that we cannot ever limit. He's the God who describes himself so majestically in the words of the prophet Isaiah in the well-known 40th chapter. This God who puts the question, who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand, or with the breadth of his hand marked off the heavens? Who has held the dust of the earth in a basket, or weighed the mountains on the scales, and the hills in a balance? Who has understood the mind of the Lord, or instructed him as his counselor? Whom did the Lord consult to enlighten him? And who

taught him the right way? Who was it that taught him knowledge, or showed him the path of understanding? And you can get the feel of the absolute captivity in which Paul finds himself with relation to God and his eternal purposes, when at the end of Romans 11, he cries out,

Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God, how unsearchable his judgments and his paths beyond tracing out. Who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?

Who has ever given to God that he should repay him? For from him, and through him, and to him, are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen. And friends, isn't it a good thing?

As we come to the end of the year. And we're conscious of the passing of the months, the days. We're conscious of what, in the light of eternity, are the little things that happen to us, regularly or irregularly. But we are conscious, or we should be, at the end of the year, of the passing of our days. And isn't it a good thing to lift up our eyes, lift up our hearts, to the eternal God who made us, the eternal God who has purposes for us, the eternal God to whom we should give glory forever. And so Moses begins this prayer, this psalm, it's both of these. He begins it by speaking of time and eternity. But he goes on, from verse 7, he goes on to speak of time and judgment.

We are consumed by your anger and terrified by your indignation. Now clearly, he introduces a much more somber note in this section of the psalm. He has been lifting us up into the heavenlies in the opening verses. In spite of our own time-bound nature, he's been calling us to look up to the eternal God. But now he reminds us that there are serious realities that we must face in the light of these things. It's not merely the fact of death, of which he actually speaks in verse 5. You sweep men away in the sleep of death, like the new grass of the morning. Morning it springs up, by evening it's dry and withered. It's not only the reality of death that he brings before us. It's not only the reality of suffering, but suffering, inevitably linked with our mortality. Verse 10, the length of our days is seventy years, or eighty if we have the strength, yet their span is but trouble and sorrow. It's not just that, but he brings in another reality, and that is the reality of the judgment of a holy God.

[18 : 21] Verses seven and eight, we're consumed by your anger. Verse eight, you have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your presence. Now, obviously, for many people who might read that or listen to it, they see it as lugubrious and mournful. Yes, let's speak of the greatness and the majesty of God, if you like. But how often we've heard it, if this topic is ever brought in, if you and I, perhaps, with a friend or a neighbor, a colleague, we see an opportunity to speak of the need for forgiveness of sins or the sins or the reality of death and eternity. How often we're told, well, speak of something more cheerful. Don't be so lugubrious. And it is true that many see it as that and therefore refuse to consider this reality that God brings before us. Quite a few years ago, when I was minister in Dornoch, at one time, it was in December at the end of the year, somebody passed a copy to us of the local secondary school. It was actually Golsby High School, school magazine. And I was leafing through it, and there was a poetry section. And one of the senior pupils had written what really was a very reflective poem. The philosophy behind it was very different from the one that any of us would share.

But there were a couple of lines that really struck me. He was writing about death. And he said, this modest box to house your bones is soundproofed, and you will not hear that morbid minister's monotonous.

Now, as it happened, at that time, I'd just conducted several funerals. And, well, I hope that if the young lad, he wouldn't have been there, I suppose. Well, who knows? But I hope that he wouldn't feel that I could be characterized as morbid or monotonous. But what would certainly be true is that faced with death and conducting a funeral service, that there was a facing up to reality, realism, the fact that death comes to us all, just as the year ends for us all.

And that there is an accountability before Almighty God. Now, of course, if that's all the Bible were to say, that there is such a thing as death and judgment, then we could understand the dislike of this young fellow and many like him. But it is foolish to turn our eyes and to turn a blind eye to the reality of time and mortality and judgment. They all go together.

I remember on one occasion, a former minister of your congregation here, Reverend Douglas Macmillan, was telling us that in one of our highland towns or villages, I don't know where, he came across a small group of faith mission pilgrims, as they were called. I don't know if they still use that term. But they were having a meeting in the open air. And a small crowd had gathered just to listen to what these folk were saying. And there was a man in the audience, and he shouted out, you're at liberty to do that in open air meetings, to heckle if you wish. He shouted out to the faith mission

group, tell me one thing in that Bible of yours that you can prove to be true, that you can prove is true. And there was a young Irish faith mission lassie there, and as quick as a flash, she replied to him, it is appointed unto men once to die. Irrefutable, true.

[23 : 20] There was a slight pause. The fellow didn't say anything. And then she added, and after death, the judgment. And this brings us, of course, not only forward, but backwards. Forward to the great day of judgment, but backwards to ask us, how's it all come about? Why is there such a thing as judgment?

Why do we need to consider what the Bible calls sin? And it takes us way back to the beginning of things, to the Garden of Eden, when because of man's disobedience. In the day that you eat of that fruit, you shall surely die. And they did. And death came to them, physical death, spiritual death. And the apostle Paul makes clear that that affected not only them, but affects us. When in Romans 5, at verse 12, he tells us that sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin. And in this way, death came to all men, because all have sinned. And it is a sad fact, as Moses tells us in this psalm, in verse 9, that all our days pass away under your wrath. That there is the gulf between God in His holiness and you and I in our sin. And that God in His holiness judges and will judge the sin of men and women. And that every unrepentant day heaps up more and more judgment in the sight of God. And Paul in that same chapter, or in the previous chapter in Romans chapter 2, Paul expands on this, because he says to his fellow Jews who were refusing to believe that God would judge one day through Jesus Christ, the Messiah, he says to them, do you show contempt for the riches of His kindness, tolerance, and patience? Not realizing that God's kindness leads you towards repentance?

But because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath for yourself for the day of God's wrath, when His righteous judgment will be revealed. And God's Word, I keep saying Moses, and of course Moses is God's instrument here, but the whole of God's Word, and God Himself from heaven reminds us not only that He, the Eternal One, has made us creatures of time, but He tells us that He hates sin, and that He judges sin, and that He will judge sin in that great final judgment day. And that the part of wisdom for every single one of us is to hear His warnings, and to react as we should to them. And so that brings us to the last part of the psalm, where Moses speaks, firstly it was of time and eternity, then of time and judgment, but then he speaks of time and salvation.

And the note changes. It's not all somber in this psalm. And thinking of the time of year, that has just passed, we know the reason for this wonderful change of note, where, for example, in verse 14, there comes a prayer, satisfy us in the morning with your unfailing love. How can we know it?

[27 : 15] Well, it brings us to the astounding event of the incarnation, when the timeless one, Jesus Christ, the Eternal Son of God, He entered time and became subject to the restraints of time.

But not only that, He worked out within time, within space, the wonder of salvation. He dealt in time with the sin problem by Himself by Himself bearing our sins in His own body on the tree. And it is in time that you and I must face our sin, our judgment, our mortality, but also the removal of that sin and the escape from that final judgment. And so, there is this great prayer that you have here in this psalm. Teach us, in verse 12, teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain a heart of wisdom.

And the psalmist tells us that if we do, then what follows is going to be true for us, that instead of grief and sorrow, which are highlighted in the psalm, what we will experience is love and joy.

There in verse 14, verse 15, make us that we may sing for joy and be glad all our days. Here's the great exchange, the great difference. Make us glad for as many days as you have afflicted us, for as many years as we have seen trouble. And if we heed this great prayer that's central in this psalm, teach us to number our days, that we may aright, that we may gain a heart of wisdom.

What a wonderful, wonderful transformation, for we only gain it, of course, through Jesus Christ, through coming to him in repentance and in faith. There's a very striking incident that's recorded for us in a General Assembly of the Church of Scotland sometime in the 1830s, late 1830s.

[29 : 43] The speaker presenting a particular motion was Dr. Thomas Chalmers. Chalmers had trained in the University of St. Andrews. He was particularly interested in mathematics, but then he went in for the ministry, not sadly because he had any true call in his heart from God, but it was a good way of being assured of being assured of a decent living and a decent stipend. And he was called, as many of you know, to a congregation in Fife. And there, from Monday to Friday, he went along to the University of St. Andrews. He taught mathematics, loved the academic atmosphere,

loved, of course, the income that came with it. And Saturday and Sunday, he fulfilled his ministerial duties. And on one occasion, at that time of his life, when those who were more interested in hearing what God had to say in the

Bible than what the cultural patterns were of the time, when some of them were trying to defeat what was called in those days pluralities. In other words, that a minister could be a minister and at the same time have another job. Both of them, two salaries, two sets of activities. Chalmers, in his early days, he spoke up and said, it's perfectly acceptable that a man can spend his whole week in whatever cultural or academic pursuits he wishes and fulfill perfectly adequately his ministerial duties on the two remaining days. What he meant, of course, is that he would prepare and read out some moralistic essay from the pulpit on the Sunday, and on the Saturday attend to anything like a funeral or perhaps visit somebody who was sick. And that was it. Well, the years passed, and a larger number of people within the Church of Scotland were longing to bring it back to a biblical basis and to have the glorious gospel freely preached. And the debate at the time I mentioned a moment ago came up to forbid the holding of pluralities. And Thomas Chalmers was leading the debate.

But after he'd sat down, a young minister got up and he began by saying that he was quoting something from a minister of the Church of Scotland. And he quoted the words about working from Monday to Friday, perfectly acceptably, and doing your minister's duties Saturday and Sunday. And then with a flourish, getting the attention of there were hundreds and hundreds of ministers and elders, getting their attention, he pointed to Chalmers and said, who wrote or spoke those words? Dr. Thomas Chalmers. And he thought he'd won his case.

Well, Chalmers got up, and you can imagine the silence that was prevailing in the assembly. He said several things. I'm just about to quote a couple of sentences. Here's what he said.

Strangely blinded that I was. What, sir, is the object of mathematical science? Magnitude and the proportions of magnitude. But then, sir, I had forgotten two magnitudes.

[34 : 04] I thought not of the littleness of time or of the greatness. I recklessly thought not of the greatness of eternity. It took an illness that brought him to the doors of death to bring Thomas Chalmers, supposedly a minister of the gospel to a true repentance and faith in Jesus Christ. And what he said then is surely what should be in our hearts and minds today. Yes, we thank God for time, for all his blessings, all the enjoyments that we have here in time. But let us remember the reality of eternity. And discover that as we put our faith in Jesus Christ, a wonderful thing happens. We're still in time. We're still mortal.

That friend of mine, 80 years of age, was going to receive his birthday card. As I bought it, it suddenly struck me, well, here I am. I'm older than he is, and I'm sending him this card. Our time will come to an end, yes. But do you know what? But you know what the wonder of the gospel is? That Jesus says that he who believes in him receives the gift of eternal life. As you trust in Jesus, as you put your faith in him, then eternity becomes part of you. Because Jesus Christ comes to live and take possession of your life.

We go through time and the gates of death, but we do so as the possessors of eternal life.

And then time for us will be swallowed up forever in eternity. May God teach you, may he teach you, as the psalmist says, to number your days aright, so that you may apply your heart to wisdom. Let us bow in prayer.

We thank you, O Lord our God, for your word that is old but never ever new. We thank you that to us who are mortal, who are very conscious of the passing of the years, there comes this glorious message of eternal life in Jesus Christ, our Lord. So that though we may indeed suffer the realities of all that time brings to us in sorrow, in loss, in pain, that yet these are all transcended as we find ourselves through faith in Jesus, the children of the eternal God. May this be true for each and every one of us. In Jesus' name, amen.