

Psalm 93

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[0 : 0 0] Let's turn then to Psalm 93. I suppose we're still at the point, it's only the second week that we've been back in our building. I know for some of you, this is your first day that you've been in the building. You were away on holiday last week or some other commitment that didn't allow you to be here. So, we're still at that stage of kind of getting used to things, and I hope, and I think it is the case, appreciating our new surroundings.

And as we do look around, we're reminded, I guess, that architects and interior designers and builders and decorators can refurbish a building. The evidence of that is all around us.

And we're grateful for the work that has been done. We're very pleased with the work that has been done. Grateful to God and grateful to the different people that He has used.

Many within the congregation who have really given so much in terms of time to the work, and of course, others from outside, contractors and others who have been involved. But for all that, it is, of course, the case that a building is just a building. What do we need to do now? What will make this place a place of blessing, a place of beauty? How can we decorate or adorn or make beautiful the house of God? Is that something that we want to do? Is that something that we as part of this community of God's people, do we want our congregation to be a beautiful place? And if we do, how can we make that happen? What makes a church beautiful? The psalmist here in Psalm 93 praises

God. And he does so as we come to the end of the psalm in a very striking and suggestive way that has often caught my attention. But I've never really given it a huge amount of thought. I suppose just the words I'll read them in a moment. Just in reading the words, you get some notion of what is being said, but perhaps left a little bit tantalizingly thinking, well, just exactly what does that mean?

And the words that I'm focusing my attention on and inviting you to do the same are there in the final verse. Your statutes stand firm, but then especially what follows. Holiness adorns your house.

[2 : 3 4] Holiness adorns your house. Holiness makes beautiful your house. Some translations, and we'll make reference to this in due course, translate the verb there as holiness befits your house, carrying a somewhat different sense, but a complementary one. So here you have this striking language, this very suggestive language, but what does it mean? What does it mean to declare, as the psalmist does, holiness adorns your house? And of course, he's directing these words to God.

Is this something that we can witness or experience or be part of as God's people in here, in this place, or as we, in a sense, represent this place or this congregation out there? Is this something that has to do with us? This recognition or this declaration that holiness adorns the house of God.

How can we adorn? How can we make beautiful the house of God? And, well, the psalmist tells us, we need to explore what he means by it, but he tells us simply enough, holiness is that which will adorn or make beautiful the house of God. What does that mean? What does that look like?

Well, let me suggest that the holiness that adorns the house of God takes two forms and can be understood in two complementary ways. First of all, I think we can identify in what the psalmist is saying, it's difficult to know for certain what he has in mind when he uses this language, but I think we can at least suggest that he has in mind the holiness of God. This holiness that adorns the house of God. What holiness is he speaking of? Well, surely there must be this element, the holiness of God adorns, make beautiful the house of God. But I think also it is reasonable to imagine, to presume that the psalmist has in mind also the holiness of God's people. Our holiness adorns the house of God. Our holiness makes beautiful the church of Jesus Christ, and particularly the congregation of that church that we form a part of. So that's what we want to do. We want to think of these two aspects, if we want to call it that way, these two complementary ways in which holiness adorns the house of God. So first of all, the holiness of God. Now when we talk about the holiness of God, we're really talking about the intrinsic character of God or God Himself. And as I was thinking about this, I was reminded of the beautiful words of the Magnificat or Mary's song.

We read them a few moments ago. My soul glorifies the Lord. And then a little further on, she gives one of the reasons for it. For the mighty one has done great things for me. Holy is His name. Holy is His name. We know that the name of God is that which speaks of His character, of who He is. And many acknowledges that His name is holy. So when we speak of the holiness of God, in a real sense, we're speaking of God Himself. But maybe we need to backtrack a little and identify the location of the house the psalmist is speaking about. He says, holiness adorns your house. And he's directing these words to God. So what does the psalmist have in mind when he speaks of your house or the house of God?

[6 : 34] Now in the course of the psalm, and we're really not going to be thinking about the psalm in its totality hardly at all, but we can at this point notice that in the course of the psalm, the psalm has already, or the psalmist has already painted a magnificent picture of God's throne room in heaven. The Lord reigns. He is robed in majesty. The Lord is robed in majesty and is armed with strength. I wonder, is this the house that the psalmist has in mind? Heaven itself. And it's certainly true that the holiness of God, God Himself adorns heaven, makes heaven beautiful. But while it's possible that the psalmist has that in mind, it seems much more likely that the psalmist has principally in mind the temple in Jerusalem, or depending on when the psalm was written, the tabernacle. What was the temple first and foremost? Well, it was, as we were thinking about this morning, it was the dwelling place of God on earth and amongst His people. It was God's house. And at the very heart of the temple, as again we gave some thought to this morning, what was to be found was the Holy of Holies filled with the presence and glory of God, a kind of replica heaven on earth.

That's maybe one way we could approximate to understand what the temple was, and very especially the Holy of Holies. And who filled the temple? Who adorned the most holy place? Well, it was God, the holiness of God. Or if you wish, the holy God adorned the house of God. It was God's presence that made the temple a place of beauty. Maybe to kind of get the sense of that, though, I think it's clear enough. But maybe to help us get the sense of that, it's a bit like a house where somebody very dear to us lives. We can maybe think of when we were children and we visited the granny and grandpa's house. And it was always so exciting to go to granny and grandpa's house. There was always a special treat. There was always a warm welcome. And it was a very special place for us as children. It was a magical place. Granny's house, grandpa's house. And yet the time comes when maybe granny dies, grandpa dies, and maybe we return to the house. And it's just not the same. It's the same house. It's the same garden where we played, the same trees that we climbed, the same kitchen where we ate. But it's just not the same. It's just a house. It's just a shell. Why? Because the one who made that place special is not there. And so it's no longer a special place, no longer a place that draws us, no longer a place that we even want to be. And so there's a sense in which that's true of

God's house. If we think, and we're still thinking of the temple, in the absence of the presence of God, nothing special, nothing that would draw us, nothing beautiful about it in the absence of God.

And of course, that's true of the church. In the absence of God's presence, nothing of beauty, nothing of value, no purpose served without God at present.

God is the one, the holiness of God. God himself is the one who adorns his house. But if we focus in a little bit more on the actual language here of the holiness of God, or holiness, and we're applying it to God at this point, the holiness of God, what can we say about that? How can we develop a little bit the sense of that word in particular? Now, we've already said that to talk of the holiness of God is really to talk of God himself. But what aspects of God's identity are particularly highlighted when we speak of his holiness. But when we speak of the holiness of God, we're certainly focusing in on his altogether awesome character, that which inspires awe in us. Our God is an awesome God. He is glorious and majestic and altogether splendid. And to speak of the holiness of God is certainly at one level, or in a measure, to focus in on this reality of the identity and character of God. But to speak of the holiness of God also, and maybe this is where our mind is more immediately drawn to, it speaks of his perfect purity. There is no evil in God. He is altogether without blemish. But he's not only without blemish, he's not only devoid of evil, he is positively marked by a perfect and altogether lovely goodness and kindness. He is a holy God. He is perfectly pure in his character and in all his ways.

[12 : 08] God is beautiful and his presence adorns his house. Well, so far we've been acknowledging that the psalmist when he spoke in these terms, holiness adorns your house, perhaps had in the first instance in mind the temple, but we don't have a temple anymore. So, where does that leave us? How does God today come and dwell amongst us and make beautiful his house? Well, we know that God came down in the person of his son, Jesus, the fairest of 10,000, the altogether lovely one came and dwelt among us. We beheld his glory, his beauty full of grace and truth. And that's a glorious reality, the coming down of Jesus to dwell amongst us. But again, you might say, well, yes, that's true, but that was 2,000 years ago.

What about now? Jesus ascended into heaven and I'm sure together with his father adorns heaven. But then, having ascended into heaven, the holiness of God descended again at Pentecost in the person of the Holy Spirit to dwell in his new temple, the church of which we form a part. The presence of the Spirit of God serves to adorn and make beautiful the church, our church, this church, as he points us to the Father as he points us to the Son. The shorter catechism reminds us that man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever. And that enjoyment of God, in part, has to do with appreciating his beauty. And that's, of course, something we can do anywhere and in any circumstance, but perhaps especially as we gather together to praise his name and listen to his voice and delight in his beauty.

The beauty that adorns this place, that adorns the church. Well, may that be true of us as a congregation. May God himself be the one who adorns this place with his presence and with his blessing.

So, here when the psalmist speaks of how holiness adorns your house, I think at one level we can understand that to be a reference to how God himself adorns his house. But I think there must also surely be a reference to the holiness of God's people, of us, of believers, how our holiness is also intended to adorn, to make beautiful the house of God. Well, in what sense is that the case? In what sense is the holiness of God's people to adorn God's house, the church, or this congregation? Maybe as a starting point, we need to say a little about the nature of this holiness of God's people. This is a big subject, but let me just say three things about the holiness of God's people before identifying more explicitly in what ways this holiness adorns God's house, this church. So, three things about the holiness of God's people.

First thing that's maybe a foundational truth that we need to stress is that the holiness of God's people is derivative or reflective. Our holiness is not independent of God's holiness. Our holiness is God's holiness in us. It is from God and reflective of God. It is what marks us out as belonging to God.

[15 : 57] It is, if you wish, the family likeness. God is holy, and in the measure that we are holy, we demonstrate whose we are. We show the family likeness. It's derivative, it's reflective. But the holiness of God's people is also purposeful. It's sometimes suggested or explained that the word holy has two senses.

The first sense is that which is set apart. So, something or someone holy is something or someone set apart. And then it's also said, another sense of the word is the idea of moral purity. So, if somebody's holy, well that's to describe them as being morally pure in their character and conduct. One has to do with our status and the other has to do with our conduct or character. And while I think there's truth in those two aspects, I wonder if making the distinction can sometimes be unhelpful. Because really the two come together. We have been set apart, yes, we are holy in that sense. We have been set apart, but we have been set apart with a purpose. And that purpose is to live holy and beautiful lives. Lives that are holy in character and conversation and conduct. If we think about the implements in the temple, going back to the temple just for a moment, that were designated as holy. These were inanimate objects and yet they're described as holy. Why? Well, yes, because they were set apart. The spoon was set apart for use in the temple, taken away from the kitchen and used in some function of the temple. So, it was a holy spoon or a holy candlestick or whatever it was. But it wasn't, of course, these implements, they weren't only set apart. They were set apart to perform a function, a very specific function, a good function in the running and ordering of the temple. And so too with us. Yes, we have been set apart. We are holy.

That is our status, our God-given status. But we have been set apart for a purpose, to do good, to bless others. And maybe at the risk of sounding a bit twee, to make the world a better, more beautiful place. So, our holiness, the holiness of God's people is derivative, it's reflective, it's purposeful.

And then, and this really is a repetition in a sense of what's already been said, it's God-given. We cannot generate our own holiness. It is the gift or work of the triune God. Just, I think it was last week, I was reading in Spurgeon's Daily Notes and was taken with a manner in which he identified how the three persons of the Trinity act in beautiful synergy or harmony in the matter of making us holy, sanctifying us, or sanctifying us, to use parallel language. And for this evening, I simply limit myself to noting the texts that were highlighted by Spurgeon. He highlighted how in Jude chapter 1 and verse 1, God's people are described as sanctified by God the Father. Now, for those of you who are very attentive and are looking at the text, good for you, you may notice that in our version it says, love by God the Father. And there is a textual issue there. But even if in this verse in Jude, sanctified by God the Father is not the most helpful translation, or indeed the more modern versions capture the original text better, that truth remains a valid one. We are sanctified by God the Father.

God the Father sets us apart for Himself. But then we turn to 1 Corinthians chapter 1 and verse 2, and Paul, in addressing the Christians in Corinth, describes in this way, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy. So, God sets apart, but He does so in Christ Jesus. In and through the work of Jesus we are sanctified. He is the one who makes it possible for us to be sanctified. And then Spurgeon directs our attention to 1 Peter chapter 1 and verse 2, where it speaks of how we are sanctified, or how we are, how God works in us through the sanctifying work of the Spirit. And so, there's this continuing work, in this case of the Spirit of God, sanctifying us, making us ever more like Jesus. And of course, that's a work in which we are called to cooperate. And no doubt we can say more about that, but we'll leave it there. But moving on to the final thing that I want to say, having noted one or two aspects of the holiness of God's people, just pose this question and try and answer it. How does the holiness of God's people adorn God's house? I think we can say two things about it. The first thing that we can say about the holiness of God's people is that it is fitting. Now, here we are acknowledging that the word translated here adorns your house has, what could we say, a range of meaning. And one way of understanding the word is, and some versions ought to translate the word with that verb befits. Holiness befits your house.

[21 : 40] Holiness, God-likeness, purity of character and conversation is fitting for those who belong in God's family, for those who are part of the church of Jesus Christ. It is fitting, it is appropriate to live lives that are not holy, clashes with who we are. If I can maybe give an illustration, which I suspect is a very poor illustration, but to try and illustrate something of what I'm talking about. When we returned to the building a couple of weeks ago, one of the things that happened was all the stuff that had been in storage, you know, furniture and other stuff came back.

And as the stuff was brought back, you know, there were some things that we looked at and we thought, you know, this stuff just doesn't have a place here. Remember these old plastic chairs with their kind of metal structure? Like, you know, I don't want to be kind of snobbish about that, but you know, they're just, they're ugly chairs. And you thought, well, they just don't fit. You know, they just don't fit now.

You know, there's nothing wrong with them, but they just somehow don't fit. Now that very poorly illustrates the sense here or this sense of the word of holiness being fitting in God's house.

A life that is not holy, a Christian whose life is careless, a Christian who sins without care, it just doesn't fit. It clashes with who we are. Now, by all means, let's keep on being part of, but let's recognize that that is just not as it ought to be. Holiness befits your house. But perhaps the primary sense, and certainly the one that the translators of the Bible that we're using fix on, is this idea of holiness adorning the house of God. And the holiness of God's people makes the church, our church, a beautiful place. We acknowledge that principally it is God's beauty that beautifies the church. But it is also true that it is for us as God's children to make this place beautiful.

Sin is ugly. And if I can invent a verb which is a very ugly verb, and maybe it fits because it should be an ugly verb, given what I want to say. Sin is ugly and uglifies a church. It just makes a church something horrible and something that is unpleasant when sin is present. When we who are part of the church are guilty of sin and are unwilling to repent of that sin and persist in that sin. But on the other end, holiness is beautiful and beautifies a church. Now that is a verb and a much more pleasant word.

[24 : 44] Holy conversation is a beautiful thing. Holy motivations overcome discouragement and help us to persevere in doing good. Holy service is radical and self-sacrificing and delights to go the extra mile.

And even to help at a church cleaning on a Tuesday night. That kind of practical holiness that makes a church beautiful. And such holiness of life not only adorns the church and blesses fellow believers, it's a powerful means to draw others to the Lord as those around us are drawn not only to us, but to the church that we are part of by the beauty of our character and conduct. Now we might say that we fall very far short and I'm sure we do.

But the fact that we fall short is not a reason for us not to, with God's help, see this as a worthy and doable aspiration to live lives marked by holiness in conduct and character that draw others to the family that we form part of. By our lives we can make the church beautiful in the eyes of others.

And so to draw things to a close we're grateful to God for this beautiful building. But now we have the task of adorning or making this place, this community of God's people a thing, a place of beauty.

And how will we do that? Well the answer is simple enough and it's in the words that we've been giving thought to this evening. Holiness adorns your house, holiness adorns the house of God, holiness adorns the church of Jesus Christ. Let's pray. Heavenly Father we do thank you for your word, we thank you for who you are, we thank you that you are indeed the holy God. Holy is your name. We thank you that you are the God who adorns heaven, that you are the God who adorns your church. We thank you that by your presence you make this place a place of beauty, a place of purpose, a place of satisfaction. We thank you also for this high calling that you lay upon us that we would reflect something of your character.

[27 : 14] That as those made in your image and likeness, as those adopted into your family, we would show the family likeness as we are transformed into men and women marked by holiness, marked by likeness holiness to your son Jesus. And we pray that as that takes place, so we in our own small way would adorn the house of God, would make beautiful the church of which we form a part. And these things we pray in Jesus name. Amen.