

A heart of wisdom

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[0 : 00] So the reading is Psalm 90, which can be found on page 596. Psalm 90.

Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting, you are God. You return man to dust and say, return, O children of man. For a thousand years in your sight are but as yesterday when it is past, or as a watch in the night.

You sweep them away as with a flood. They are like a dream, like grass that is renewed in the morning. In the morning it flourishes and is renewed.

In the evening it fades and withers. For we are brought to an end by your anger. By your wrath we are dismayed.

[1 : 08] You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your presence. For all our days pass away under your wrath.

We bring our years to an end like a sigh. The years of our life are 70, or even by reason of strength 80. Yet their span is but toil and trouble.

They are soon gone and we fly away. Who considers the power of your anger and your wrath according to the fear of you?

So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom. Return, O Lord. How long? Have pity on your servants. Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love. That we may rejoice and be glad all our days.

[2 : 07] Make us glad for as many days as you have afflicted us. And for as many years as we have seen evil. Let your work be shown to your servants.

And your glorious power to their children. Let the favour of the Lord our God be upon us. And establish the work of our hands upon us.

Yes, establish the work of our hands. Great, thank you very much Vicky. Do keep that passage open in front of you. William Shakespeare is widely regarded as one of the greatest playwrights of all time.

And in his play Macbeth, I don't know how many of you studied it for GCSE or O-Level. But in Macbeth, Lady Macbeth commits suicide. And Macbeth doesn't know what to do.

He's trying to make sense of life. What's it all about? And he says this. He says, life's but a walking shadow. A poor player that struts and frets his hour up on the stage.

[3 : 13] And then is heard no more. It is a tale told by an idiot. Full of sound and fury. Signifying nothing.

Is that it? Are we just shadows lasting only an hour on the stage of life and then gone? Signifying nothing? In the face of death, how do we make sense of life?

Perhaps you stood by the graveside of someone you love. And you think to yourself, was that it? What's life about? How do you make sense of it?

Well, today we're starting a series in the book of Psalms in the Bible. And the Psalms are a great book for helping us make sense of life. The Psalms are God's word to us.

But they're also our words to God. They're the songbook of God's people throughout history. So they're full of emotions.

[4 : 18] Joy, anguish, fear, hope, despair. They're honest about what it feels like to live in this world. The Psalms are heartfelt expressions of what it feels like to be human.

And they're written so that we, too, would sing them in the light of Jesus. You might know we've recently been looking at the book of Luke as a church, Grace Church.

And in Luke chapter 24, verse 44, Jesus says that he fulfills the law of Moses, the prophets, and the Psalms. So as we look at the Psalms together, we should be asking how Jesus fulfills them.

How can we sing the Psalm in the light of Jesus? Now, as Andy said, today we're looking at Psalm 90. And many of you will know that Psalm 90 is read at funerals.

So it's often people kind of associate it with death and they find it very morbid and depressing. But it's not a psalm for the dead. It's a psalm for the living. It's a psalm to help us make sense of life in the face of death.

[5 : 24] And to get a heart of wisdom, as we'll see in verse 12. So have a look down with me at Psalm 90 in front of you. And you'll see the first line says, A prayer of Moses, the man of God.

Now, some people think that Moses wrote this when the Israelites were slaves in Egypt, suffering under the Egyptians for 400 years, as he reflects on death all around them and how short life is. Other people think perhaps he wrote it a bit later, when the Israelites were wandering around the desert in the wilderness because of their rebellion against God. Other people think it was written a bit later in the exile at the time of the Babylonians, years later.

But whichever it is, it reflects on the fragility of life, that life is fleeting and fragile. And the psalm reminds us that we are not God.

When I was at university, I met a biochemistry student and I asked him what he thought of God. And do you know what he said? He said to me, We are gods.

[6 : 33] That's what he said. He said, we are gods. We are able to manipulate gene expression and biochemical pathways to play with human life. We can be gods ourselves.

We don't need the God of the Bible. We can play God. Science and technology can save us. Many of you may remember the 14-year-old girl back in November of last year who died of cancer. And for £37,000, she was cryogenically frozen over in America. She wanted to be revived in hundreds of years' time when the technology has apparently advanced enough.

She was looking to science and technology to save her. And I guess there's something of that girl in all of us, isn't there? We all want to live forever. We want to be immortal. We want to be, well, like God.

We've believed the lie that Adam and Eve believed in Genesis 3 verse 5. Do you remember? You will be like God. Our culture says that there is no God, so you've got to be gods.

[7 : 39] Put your trust in science and technology to save you. But the Bible tells us a different story, a better story.

And that brings us to the first thing I want us to see in this passage. If you've got a handout, do follow it on the back. And that is that God is everlasting. And that's from verses 1 and 2.

Have a look in the passage with me, verse 1. Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth or you ever had you formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting, you are God.

Most of the mountains on earth are estimated to be a few hundred million years old. And the earth itself is estimated to be more than four and a half billion years old.

They seem so permanent, so eternal. But there was a time, long ago, when they didn't exist. Before God had created the world, they didn't exist.

[8 : 45] But he existed not just a few billion years ago, but in eternity past. God is from everlasting to everlasting.

He always has existed and he always will exist. And so the psalmist reflects on Genesis chapter 1, verse 1, that in the beginning, God. Now I guess it's quite difficult, isn't it, for our minds to grasp eternity and God's eternal nature.

Listen to how Albert Einstein describes it when looking at the universe. He says, we're like in the position of a little child, entering a huge library whose walls are covered to the ceiling with many books in many different tongues.

The child knows that someone must have written those books, but it doesn't know how, it doesn't know who or what language is. The child notes a definite plan in the arrangements of the books, a mysterious order which it cannot comprehend but only dimly suspects.

That, Albert Einstein says, seems to me is the attitude of the human mind towards God. Even the most cultured and greatest minds.

[9 : 52] We see a universe marvelously arranged, obeying certain laws, but we cannot understand the laws fully. Our limited minds cannot grasp the mysterious force that sways the constellations.

Our minds can barely grasp God's eternal nature, but in comparison with him, the earth and the world and the mountains are fragile and temporary.

There was a time when they didn't exist. So where will you make your home? I wonder if you notice that in verse 1. Have a look again with me. You have been our dwelling place in all generations. Generations come, generations go, but God is the refuge, the safe place, the place to dwell in. You might remember that the Israelites in the Old Testament lived in tents, partly as a reminder that God was their house, their dwelling place, their permanent home.

I guess some of us live in Victorian houses, perhaps a few hundred years old, but a few hundred years is nothing, is it, compared to the eternal God who is from everlasting to everlasting.

[11:03] He is our ultimate home where we're accepted, loved and secure. I wonder if you remember a few months ago, Stephen Hawkins, Professor Hawkins, telling us that we should colonize other planets.

He's recommending that we should have another lunar expedition and eventually to settle on Mars, because he says the Earth can't support our life forever. He thinks this planet cannot be our ultimate home.

So where will you make your home? Or who will you make your home with? Who is eternal enough to always be there with you, powerful enough to keep you safe completely, and loving enough that he will never leave you?

God is everlasting. Make him your eternal home. The second thing I want to see from this passage is that we are mortal because of our sin, and that's from verses 3 to 11.

We are mortal because of our sin. Have a look down, if you've got the passage in front of me, at verse 3. In contrast to the everlasting God, man is dust.

[12:18] You return man to dust and say, return, O children of man. The psalmist is picking up language of Genesis again. Genesis chapter 3, verse 19, when God says to Adam, dust you are, and to dust you shall return.

You see, we were made to live with the God who made us forever, but just as Adam and Eve turned their backs on God and went their own way, we too turn our backs on our creator.

We don't want to make a home with him. We want to make our own home, thanks very much. We cut ourselves off from the source of life, and it leads to death.

Like a flower, you cut it, put it in a vase, it lasts a few days, beautifully flourishing, but eventually it shrivels and fades and decays, and eventually it turns to dust.

And we too are children of man, or children of Adam. That is, we follow in his footsteps, and we go our own way. And the result is in verse, sorry, the result is that our lives are fleeting.

[13:28] And so in verse 4, God says, a thousand years in your sight are but as yesterday when it's passed, or as a watch in the night.

So if you lived for a thousand years to God, it would just be like a day, or even shorter, a watch in the night, about three hours. So the everlasting God a thousand years is like yesterday when it's already passed.

Do you remember what you were doing yesterday? Do you remember where you were? Do you remember what you did? It's gone. You'll never get it back.

It wasn't very short. It wasn't very long, was it? The feeling of how short yesterday is, that's a bit of the same feeling that God gets when he thinks about a thousand years.

It's gone. Not very long. And our lives are far shorter than a thousand years. In verse 10, we read that they are 70 years, or 80, if we have the strength.

[14:32] And as a result, the psalmist describes our lives like a dream. Have a look at verse 5. You sweep them away as with a flood. They're like a dream. Do you remember any dreams you've had?

Have any dreams last night? Maybe at the time they felt like reality. But then you wake up, and you can barely remember what it was about. Later that day, you've completely forgotten that you ever had the dream at all.

And mortality means that life is like a dream. There for a moment, and then gone forever. We'll have a look at the second half of verse 5. Like grass that is renewed in the morning.

In the morning, it flourishes and is renewed. In the evening, it fades and withers. I guess for Moses' readers, the Mediterranean grass could have shriveled and died in a number of hours with the hot Mediterranean sun.

And like grass, we too flourish and then fade. I guess if you're a teenager here or someone in their 20s, you're probably flourishing physically and mentally.

[15 : 41] You feel invincible. The world is in your reach. There's nothing you can't do. Perhaps you still feel like that in your 30s and 40s and 50s. If you do, that's great. But eventually, you realise you can't do as much as you used to do.

Your hair starts going grey, and unfortunately, you don't have to look that closely at mine to see that it already has. You don't have the energy you had when you were 18 anymore.

And even if you have a long lifespan to 70 years or 80, eventually, we wither and fade. I wonder if you know the name of your great-grandparents or your great-great-grandparents.

Perhaps some of you here do, but I guess many of us don't. Who will remember our names in 100 years' time? Probably very few people. We're like a day that has gone by, a few hours in the night, like a dream and like the fading grass.

Well, perhaps you're sitting here and you're thinking, well, you know, fine, we're mortal, but we're getting a bit less mortal every day. I mean, we're eating more healthily, we're living longer, we're healthier than we've ever been, we're getting cryogenically frozen.

[16 : 53] Eventually, we will be able to live forever. Science and technology will save us. But I guess that's to miss the reason why we're mortal.

And the reason we're mortal is not because science hasn't advanced enough. It's because of our sin, because of our rejection of the God who made us. Now, perhaps mentioning the word sin has kind of made you think you want to switch off.

You're trying to make sense of life, trying to make sense in a world of death. Perhaps you think maybe there is a God, maybe there must have been something before the universe existed.

Perhaps our mortality is a problem, perhaps science can't solve it all, but sin, that seems so judgmental.

Well, if that's you, keep listening, because understanding the reason for our mortality gets the heart of what it means to have a heart of wisdom, which in verse 12 we see is what the psalm is about.

And so sin is not being judgmental or kind of looking down on people. Sin is just a word the Bible uses to describe our rejection of the God who made us. I mean, if you fall out with your friend, it damages your relationship.

[18 : 07] It cuts you off from them in some ways, doesn't it? And sin is the ultimate falling out with God. It's rejecting his rule over our lives. He made us, so he has the right to tell us how to live.

And he's good. But in our arrogance, we think we know better than him. And that makes him rightly angry. The survivors of the Grenfell Tower are rightly angry.

Fire safety seems to have been compromised by the quality of the cladding on the outside of the tower. And it shows a lack of care for the residents. And they're rightly angry. Relatives of the Hillsborough disaster, the 96 people who died in 1989, are rightly angry that those responsible didn't take adequate care of the fans, that they haven't been brought to justice even 28 years later. And God is rightly angry that even though he is the everlasting, loving creator of the universe, we still don't acknowledge him as God.

We turn our backs on him. Now, God's anger, it's not the impulsive, explosive, kind of emotionally charged anger of a toddler. It's God's righteous, settled hatred of all sin, rebellion, and evil.

[19 : 30] It's part of God's goodness that he hates all evil. And to live in God's world, but to live as if we're God, is the essence of what sin is, rejecting his authority as king and living with ourselves as king.

So when God told Adam in Genesis 3, verse 19, that he would turn to dust, it wasn't just a kind of natural part of life. It was God's punishment for sin.

I wonder if you noticed that in verse 3. Have a look again with me. Psalm 90, verse 3, the word you, you return man to dust.

Or verse 5, you sweep them away as with a flood. God's judgment for sin is death. Have a look at verse 7. For we're brought to an end by your anger and by your wrath we are dismayed.

You've set our iniquities or our sins before you, our secret sins, in the light of your presence. Imagine if every wrong thing you'd ever done was kind of made into a film.

[20 : 38] You wouldn't want anyone to see it, would you? I guess you wouldn't want to see it yourself. But God sees our secret sins. He sees the ways that we reject him in ways that no one else can see.

Our selfishness, our pride, our jealousy. In the same way that light exposes a filthy attic, the light of God's presence exposes our sin for what it really is.

So verse 9, the psalmist says, So all our days pass away or decline under God's wrath. We bring our years to an end like a sigh.

Verse 10, The length of our days is toil and trouble. They're soon gone and we fly away. See, our mortality reminds us not only that we're not God, but also that he is rightly angry with our sin.

And we're a world under judgment. We're east of Eden, separated from God. Now it's really important to say here that individual suffering and death is not directly related to individual sin.

[21 : 49] And Jesus makes that really clear in the New Testament, in Luke chapter 13, verses 1 to 5, where he says that those who died, in a particular example, are not worse sinners than anyone else.

We must never say that if someone is suffering or if they died, it's because their sin was any worse than anyone else's. But it is true that in general terms, suffering and death is a result of our world under judgment.

And so when we suffer and when we face death, it should remind us that we have turned our backs on the God who made us and we urgently need to turn back to him.

As C.S. Lewis says, as many of you will know in his book, *The Problem of Pain*, God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains. It's his megaphone to rouse a deaf world.

Now perhaps you're sitting here and you're finding this difficult to hear. And it is. Our culture does not want to hear about God's wrath.

[22 : 57] We don't want to hear that we're sinful and under God's judgment. And perhaps that's why the psalmist writes verse 11. Have a look at verse 11 with me in front of you.

Who considers the power of your anger and your wrath according to the fear due to you? Answer? No one. No one.

No one wants to consider how rightly angry God is at the world in rebellion against him. We don't want to know. But we ought to fear him because one day his righteous anger at sin will be seen.

All people everywhere will come face to face with the everlasting God. So what should we do? We should pray verse 12.

Do you see verse 12 is the beginning of a prayer. Moses says, so teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom. And that brings us to the third thing I want us to see from this passage, which is that we should pray for a heart of wisdom.

[24 : 07] And that's in verses 12 to 17. I guess our culture longs to be wise, doesn't it? To imagine that we are gods.

But real wisdom is to know that the Lord is God and we are not. That's what wisdom is, that God is king and we are not. And it's not something that you can teach yourself or learn yourself.

The psalmist prays, God teach us. Because naturally, we don't want to hear it. We don't want to face our mortality or our sin. But wisdom is to number our days, to know why there are so few, why there are so full of toil and trouble.

So what does it mean to pray for a heart of wisdom? Have a look at the points on the handout. And firstly, it is to fear God, as we're told in verse 11.

Your wrath according to the fear of you. God's right anger should lead us to fear him. Proverbs chapter 1, verse 7, in there we're told that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, that wisdom is to fear God.

[25 : 20] Now, if we trust in Jesus, God's anger for our sin has already been paid for by Jesus at the cross. But we should still have a right fear of God. Like a sailor, sailing on the sea, he loves the sea.

He doesn't mess with it. He has a right fear of the sea. And having a heart of wisdom means fearing God rightly, knowing that he is rightly angry with us, apart from Jesus.

And of course, that should lead us to praise God for Jesus. Secondly, having a heart of wisdom means to long for Jesus' return.

Have a look at verse 13 with me. The psalmist says, Return, O Lord, how long? And this is the cry of the Bible.

It's the cry of the previous psalm, Psalm 89, verse 46, how long, O Lord? It's the cry of the Israelites in Egypt, in the wilderness, in the exile of the church today.

[26 : 19] And at the end of the Bible, in Revelation 22, verse 20, we read this prayer, Come, Lord Jesus, return. Remember we said at the beginning, didn't we, that the psalms are fulfilled by Jesus.

And the problem of our mortality and our sin is beautifully answered in Jesus' death and resurrection. And when Jesus returns, he will rid us of sin and death for all time.

1 Corinthians 15, verse 49, it says that just as we bore the image of the man of dust, Adam, so we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven, Jesus.

And so in the face of death, your career, your family, your money, your achievements will be no use to stop longing for them, long instead for Jesus' return.

Thirdly, having a heart of wisdom means that we should be satisfied in God's covenant love. That's in verses 14 and 15. Have a look at verse 14. It says, Satisfy in the morning with your steadfast love that we may rejoice and be glad all our days.

[27 : 33] The word for steadfast is the Hebrew word hesed, which means God's covenant love, the promises he made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob fulfilled in Jesus.

Nothing else can satisfy us, especially in the context of suffering. As the British writer and novelist Jack Higgins wrote, when you get to the top, there's nothing there.

No amount of money or fame can satisfy us, and it's only going to last for 70 or 80 years at the most anyway. The Bishop Augustine was right when he said about God, you have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless, they're unsatisfied, until they find their rest in you.

Be satisfied in God's love. And fourthly, tell the next generation about Christ. Have a look at verse 16 with me. Let your work be shown to your servants and your glorious power to their children.

Let the favour of the Lord our God be upon us and establish the work of our hands. So you could read this psalm and kind of think, in the light of our mortality and sin, let's not bother.

[28 : 48] You could think, what's the point of doing anything? Life is so fleeting, we've become cynical. But the psalmist prays that the work we do in our short lives will have some lasting impact, that God will establish it.

How can he pray that? Well, earlier on in Psalms, in Psalm 2, verse 6, God says that he's established his king, King Jesus, forever.

And it's because Jesus has conquered sin and death that it really is worth telling the next generation about him. It's worth telling our children about him, our neighbours and our friends and our colleagues about him.

There couldn't be anything more important because God has established Jesus as king. We can pray in a small way that the work we do in our lives would be established as we live with Jesus as our king.

In Macbeth, Shakespeare is partly right, but he's completely wrong. Life is a walking shadow. It's like a dream, like a day that has already passed, like yesterday, and we do only have a short time on the stage of life.

[30 : 02] But in Christ we will live beyond death. It's a better story than our world could tell because it's not told by an idiot. It's told by the God of the Bible, full of grace and truth, signifying everything that really matters.

So make the everlasting God your dwelling place. face up to your mortality and your sin and pray that God would give you a heart of wisdom to fear him, to long for Jesus' return, to be satisfied in his love and to tell the next generation about him, about the one who's conquered sin and death and will take us to be with him in the new world he will create forever.

Let's pray. Father, thank you so much that in a world of sin and death, Jesus is our hope. Thank you, Father, that you have given us these days on the earth and we pray, Father, that you would give us a heart of wisdom to use them rightly.

Help us, Father, not to think that we are gods or that we will cheat death, but help us to face up to our mortality and our sin knowing that you will one day destroy death and sin in the new creation that you will make.

We pray you would help us to trust in Jesus as our only hope in the face of death. Amen.