

A Dwelling Place for Dust

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[0 : 0 0] I've given this the title, well you could predict it from what we just heard Jeff read to us, A Dwelling Place for Dust.

Because we heard, Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations. So before we begin, let's pray. Dear Lord, we thank you that we can gather here in this place.

We thank you for the hospitality of this school. We thank you for all the children and their teachers. We thank you so much for all your many blessings. And we ask now as we come to hear from your word that you would incline our hearts to be attentive, to trust as we come to celebrate the Lord's Supper, that we would also receive from you what you offer us as we receive it with open hands and by faith.

And we ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Well, I'm not a philosopher, but if I was asked to think philosophically about the way our culture has wrestled with the most basic human longings, I'd probably take us to the 60s.

And so I hope you'll humor me as I take us back to the 60s. How many of us were around at the time? A few of us. Fantastic.

[1 : 4 3] It was in 1967, excuse me, that the Beatles told us, all you need is love. And it seems the spirit of the age was calling us to kind of love our way into a harmonious collective.

Imagine all the people living life in peace, said and preached John Lennon. You may say I'm a dreamer, but I'm not the only one. I hope someday you'll join us and the world will live as one.

I think it was still in the 60s, 1969, I think, that another John, John Denver, tried to respond to a deep sense of pessimism about the future.

If you know John Denver's music, he has songs about life and love and the environment, and some of them become somewhat philosophical. He hears his friends say to him, so you speak to me of sadness and the coming of the winter.

Likely referring to the sense of impending doom. What with war, ecological crisis, corrupt and authoritarian governments that made things worse.

[2 : 5 6] And he says to his friend, you wonder where we're going, where's the rhyme, where's the reason? And the prophet's answer comes, you probably remember it, the children and the flowers are my sisters and my brothers.

They're a promise of the future and a blessing for today. Now, here's a little confession. This evangelical little fella, missionary kid, if I ever venerated anyone in a big way, it was John Denver.

Him and Roger Staubach, who was my hero. Got to meet Roger Staubach. Anybody know who he was? Is? I think he's still alive. He was quarterback for the Dallas Cowboys back when I still watched a lot of football.

And got to meet him in Mexico City. John Denver was my other idol. I listened to just about everything he sang. And so you can imagine when he visited in Moscow, when I happened to be studying there, I made arrangements to get to go meet him, along with some of my classmates, because he was singing with Jim Henson at the American Ambassadors residence there in Moscow in about October, November of 1984.

We all got to actually talk to him. And so you can imagine how delighted I was. Anyway, that's all part of the confession part. Take you back to the 60s, because that's where we still are.

[4 : 25] John Denver was writing that song probably right in the wake of all of those student uprisings that happened in Prague and Paris and all over the place, in the States and in Mexico City.

One of those student uprisings happened, believe it or not, just blocks from where we were living. The Tlatelolco uprising that led to the massacre of about 500 students, maybe, maybe more, the Mexican army coming in and doing the job.

Well, let me take you even a few years further back to 1963, when another poet, this time a man named John Robinson, a theologian and bishop, decided to write this little book.

This is even an edition from that year, 1963, *Honest to God*. You can see there the philosopher thinking, well, maybe philosopher, maybe, I don't know how you interpret that sculpture there, but the idea is that we're under the weight of heaviness of questions about God.

And he's writing this book because he's picked up on the fact that as a culture in the West, we've more or less started to give up on the idea that God is there, objectively speaking.

[5 : 53] In other words, that he's sovereign Lord in relation to creation. Bishop Robinson said this, okay, so we don't believe that God is up there and out there anymore, so, well, let me propose maybe another metaphor.

Let me propose a metaphor that God is the ground of our being. He borrowed from Paul Tillich. And from that point, it was fashionable, it became fashionable to think of God as part of the world process.

And that truth, consequently, is something that we more or less make up as we go along. Truth about what is good, what is right, what is lovely, especially what is right.

The big term was situational ethics and how everything was contextual, which is one of those wonderful little half-truths where you can kind of sneak in a whole pack of lies.

And this little book made an impact right into Mexico City where a man walked into the bookshop that we ran there and informed my dad that this book had made of him an atheist.

[7 : 11] And he was a Christian leader. So, all of this, what's the word we hear today about deconstructing? Well, it was already happening through the influence of books like these.

So, what's my point in this little excursion into the 60s? Well, my point is that there are three basic human needs that only God can satisfy.

We may settle for a kind of free love and for this worldly hopes and ideas where we're turned in on ourselves, but our real needs are these.

First, for fellowship, for the security that we enjoy when we know who we are in relation to God and others. Second, for lasting purpose.

And third, for truth, the kind of truth that can only come from the one who made us and who can tell us what our real condition is and what is the rhyme and where is the reason.

[8 : 19] If we were among God's people around a thousand years before Jesus was born, we would have already known what those three basic longings were when we sang Psalm 27.

And I'm thinking of verse 4 in particular. You perhaps know it well. Maybe it's a psalm you've memorized. One thing I have desired of the Lord, says David, that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life.

Do you know the rest? To gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to inquire in his temple. I could almost use that as the text for what I want to share, but I'm going to take us into Psalm 90.

But the one thing there that David asks for turns out to be a triple blessing, doesn't it? He longs for a relationship with God, where God dwells.

He wants to find delight and purpose in Him and in the beauty of His creation. And he wants to receive the truth that God imparts in the temple.

[9 : 32] So make a mental note of those three things, if you haven't already. Fellowship, purpose, and truth. Because we're going to come back to them.

So let me back up 400 more years to Psalm 90, which God gave us through Moses. Maybe you didn't know that Moses wrote that psalm.

But the psalm is ordinarily read on today, the first Sunday in Lent. So it's especially appropriate that we are looking at it together.

But I can also add that as I've pondered the oldest psalm in the people of Israel's prayer book, I found it to be especially encouraging as an antidote to the message of our 1960s poet prophets.

So I invite you, if you have your Bibles, to look at it with me now. And I would divide the psalm into two parts. The first part, verses 1 to 11, and the remainder afterwards.

[10 : 40] Because in this first part, we learn about who God is, but not just in the abstract, but about who God is in relation to us. John Calvin, probably from such psalms like this, started off his great institutes of the Christian religion with the idea that we cannot know God unless we know ourselves.

And we can't know ourselves unless we know God, so that these things are intertwined. So who is God, as he himself teaches us through Moses?

Well, the first verse says, Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations. So from the way Moses addresses God, we learn that he is Adonai, or Lord.

This means sovereign ruler with supreme power and authority over all things. But, as I pointed out, notice in the very next breath, Moses declares who God is in relation to us.

You have been our dwelling place. And why is this so important, so significant? Well, it's significant because our knowledge of God, according to Scripture, isn't the kind of knowledge that's somehow disconnected from the human story.

[12 : 02] Yes, God is Lord of the universe, but he's seen fit not to sit idly by, as Calvin said in his commentary.

I don't think it was on this psalm, but he said he's seen fit not to sit idly by up in heaven, but rather to turn towards us with his favor, and even to provide a home for us.

To provide a home for us in himself. And this was especially encouraging, because Moses was likely in the wilderness, not yet in the promised land.

And the truth that God is our home was especially comforting to the people of Israel. In our earthly pilgrimage, God shows himself to be our refuge, the one who satisfies us with security and shelter.

Right from the start, he's a God for us. And we know him because he's taken the initiative to make himself known. So consider some of the other attributes, the other qualities of God.

[13 : 12] Verse 2 says, Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God.

Here we acknowledge that God is everlasting creator of the universe. But notice again, how this leads directly to a truth about ourselves.

The fact is, if you consider this phrase, from everlasting to everlasting, well, the force of it only really comes home to us as God tells us in verse 3 that we have an expiry date.

You return man to dust, it says. Return, O children of man. The season of Lent is a time when we're invited to ponder the truth that we're dust.

Not just like dust, but dust. In an intentional, focused way. But I don't think, and Daniel pointed to this already, I don't think the point is to make us focus on the fact that we're dust for its own sake.

[14 : 20] But rather to help us with that knowledge to look up to God. That's the whole point of Psalm 90. I think you'll see what I mean as I emphasize, what I'm going to emphasize in verses 4 to 6 as I read them.

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. Now the point here is not that life is an illusion.

The point is that from God's point of view, it's as if time meant nothing. It's as if our lives were a dream. Some poets have liked to play with the idea that life is a dream.

But here it's as if it were. The truth is there's nothing more real, more solid even, more enduring than dwelling in God's house.

[15 : 34] There's another truth about who God is. Apart from being sovereign Lord and creator, he is also holy. And this quality, yet again, is explained in relation to how it bears on us.

So look with me at verses 7 to 10. For we are brought to an end by your anger. By your wrath we are dismayed.

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. So here we see God's holiness on full display, don't we?

[16 : 38] Since there is no darkness in him, as 1 John 1, 5 tells us, well, he does right to bring our lives to an end. He has full rights to bring our lives to an end on account of our wickedness.

It's hard to grasp this in our sentimental age. But it's true. Moses is especially concerned to emphasize that secret dimension, that hidden dimension of sin.

The part that we think we can hide from God. The truth is when God looks at us, he sees right into us, doesn't he? And as we say in the Collect for Purity, from him no secrets are hidden.

We say it all the time. And his judgment, therefore, applies to the attitudes of the heart. So much of what the Reformation was all about, so much of, in its most basic form, was about reforming inward things, right?

even though the Reformers disagreed on how much of the outward things needed to be reformed. But at heart, it was about a reformation of inward things first, as a first priority.

[17 : 54] At this point, we say, well, wait a minute, I really quite like this lovely image of God being our refuge and dwelling place, and I love the majestic bringing forth the mountains part of it all.

But what about this anger business? That doesn't sound like good news. Well, it isn't at first glance, and verse 11 doesn't seem to make things a whole lot better, because that verse reads, if you're following with me still, who considers the power of your anger and your wrath according to the fear of you?

Well, I think the sense of this verse is something like this. God is a God whose anger and wrath we simply can't fathom, which is to say we don't know how to think of it in proportion or relation to who he is.

But from there, well, what does Moses say? Well, does he say, well, why should we bother? I was once talking to a Saudi man in Cairo, asking him what he thought of God, and he said to me, well, if you think about God for more than a few minutes, you go crazy.

And that was to change the subject, that we just shifted the subject right away. But Moses carries on. He says, well, what does he do? He calls on God for help. Sometimes you and I, when we feel stuck, when it comes to knowing God's ways, we tend to either give up or to invent things of our own.

[19 : 34] We like to fashion God in our image, maybe like a nice but forgetful old granddad, sort of like what a couple of my grandkids are hoping I'll kind of stay with for a little longer.

The fact is, God is holy and just. Which means that his anger over sin and rebellion is real. It's not, if you like, that eccentric and occasional part of God who is mostly a God of love.

Here's a bit of theology. Okay? His love is whole and complete, lacking nothing, not diminished by his other qualities. His holiness is whole and complete, lacking nothing, not diminished by his other qualities.

Which means God's anger is a righteous one, it's a holy one. And it has to be because it's perfectly consistent with his goodness and his mercy. And that's the good news we want to focus as we move into the second half of the psalm, verses 12 to 17.

It's because of God's kindness that we can come boldly to him with our requests. It's because of God's kindness that as dust we have a dwelling place.

[20 : 53] To refer back to Psalm 27 again, it's because he's our light and our salvation in the first place that we can say with confidence that our one desire is to dwell in his house, to seek his beauty and to inquire in his temple.

So as we go through these last verses of Psalm 90, I want to highlight those three, I want to highlight three practical lessons that are in it for us.

Apart from addressing our basic needs, they can serve us today as we seek to be renewed and to be reformed by God's word.

The first need that Moses addresses is our need for truth. It's not in the order that we saw earlier, but there it is. The need for truth is the one that comes first.

It's in verse 12. So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom. I want to ponder that with you a few moments.

[22 : 00] The point here is this. We know that we're dust, but what does it mean to learn this fact from God? Have you thought about that?

In the churchyard of the little Lutheran church that my daughter and her family were attending for a while back when they lived in Alberta near Barhead a few years ago, I happened to notice that many of the graves belonged to children who had died as infants.

Now, on a purely human level, just walking through a cemetery reminds us, just in a human sense, whether we've trusted God or not, that life is brief, doesn't it?

I also remember, just as another little personal anecdote, a visit to my cardiologist in Vancouver. I'm sure Stella was with me. She remembers it too.

Probably 1989 or 90. I had had heart surgery as a teenager, and so this was a routine checkup, and I remember he said something like, Steve, I expect you'll live your whole lifespan.

[23 : 18] Now, of course, that's good news, isn't it? But it caught me a little off guard, and I'm assuming that's why you're chuckling. In those decades of life when not too many of us worry, much about death, I'm not sure that I thought of life, a lifespan, as something that I actually had.

But again, sooner or later we come to know this sort of thing pretty naturally. So, back to my point. What's the, what's the, what does it mean to learn that we're finite from God?

Well, the answer is quite simple. But we are the ones who complicate it. We complicate things by becoming proficient at counting things except the number of our days.

And we tally up our assets, in our academic case, our publications, our accolades, maybe the number of likes we have on our latest video that we've posted, and we imagine ourselves to be wise in all of that.

And yet, we become fools. And that's why Moses says, what we need from you, Lord, is wisdom in this matter. So, teach us to count our days.

[24 : 38] Well, I think that when we make that our prayer, and we really, really make it our prayer, what we learn is that our relatively brief appearance is a gift from God.

And if it's a gift, then other things apply, like gratitude in the first instance, and stewardship as well.

When I think of the idea so common today that God is part of the world process, I realize what good news this is. Think of it.

if God is an impersonal force that animates the world, well, just how or where is gratitude supposed to actually register?

Talk about being thankful today, don't we, even in ordinary discourse. Or is there even a temple to inquire in? The temple always being that place, that meeting place, where we inquire, where God meets us, and we are able to hear what he has to say?

[25 : 45] Well, I don't think so. But with Psalm 90, we can be sure that we're giving thanks to a God who is there, and who by his word and spirit actually renews our minds, making us wise unto salvation, as Paul says to Timothy in 2 Timothy 3 15.

Well, what's the second basic need that Moses addresses? Well, it follows right in the next few verses. It's the need for fellowship, for intimacy.

Verses 13 to 15 invite us to ask for three more things from God. And what are they? Well, the first is, return, O Lord, have pity on your servants.

Back in verse 3, we acknowledge that God returns us to dust. And knowing that he has the power to do that, now we ask of him, will you please now return to us?

Will you come with your mercy and your power? Now, in the light of God's revelation in Jesus, what we're praying is, come Lord Jesus, Maranatha.

[27 : 01] And as Peter says in 2 Peter 3, we can even hasten that day as we pursue godliness. It's quite a truth to ponder.

The second and third requests come right together in verses 14 and 15. Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love, that we may rejoice and be glad all our days, and then make us glad for as many days as you have afflicted us, and for as many years as we have seen evil.

Moses here is giving us words to call on God early in the day, asking him to keep us in his care and to give us joy in the midst of the troubles that we're inevitably going to face.

So these three requests speak of a God who gives us himself as our dwelling place, who teaches us who we are in relation to him, and only his love really endures.

Only a relationship with him results in gladness. So this brings us to the third basic need, which is for purpose.

[28 : 18] When I say purpose, I mean direction, and it's bound up logically in these psalms with beauty and for the glory, to see God's glory. In the next two verses, Moses invites us to pray like this, let your work be shown to your servants.

And here's the glory part, and your glorious power to their children. Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us, and establish the work of our hands upon us.

Yes, establish the work of our hands. So, to recap, what have we asked for in this psalm? Well, we've asked God to teach us, and we've asked Him to be present with us, with His love, with His steadfast love, and now what are we asking for?

Well, we're asking Him to do His work through His people, by His power, and for the benefit of generations that are to come.

What a glorious thing to be asking for, which is to say, we're looking to Him for hope and direction as we await His promise. We're asking that His will will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

[29 : 35] We're asking to see something of His power and glory on display, because we want to see its impact in the world around us.

So, here's the question for us. Given the, it's not an exaggeration to say we're living in times of cultural upheaval.

Given that, how should we trust God for a renewed vision that's full of this hope that Moses talks about? Well, I can say with certainty that it can't happen simply by bringing new people into power and changing the systems that are there.

This is, of course, not a call to be disengaged or unengaged from our communities, our cities, and nation. That's where God has put us. But it is a reminder that real change only happens when and as God changes hearts.

I love how J.I. Packer put it. There is no peace like the peace of those whose minds are possessed with full assurance that they have known God and God has known them and that this relationship guarantees God's favor to them in life through death and on forever.

[31 : 06] The peace that God gives us in relationship with him. So the question is this. Have we actually come to know this God who knew us first and has known us first before we even thought to seek him out?

If so, I believe we can live with true purpose because ultimately we leave the business of changing hearts to him and then with that when we're confident that he does just that as he's promised, we simply bear witness to the things he's done and has promised to do.

I think we can do this in a host of ways according to our individual gifts and talents and opportunities, but I'll just, to end, I'll just mention one of the ways we can tell others of what God has done today.

Here's what we're up against. We're up against a post-Christian culture that says either there's no God or that if there is a God there's no way to really know this God.

I mean, that's simply what you would find out taking a poll out there. So what are we left with? Well, in practice we're left with two things. We have a simple public rule, don't hurt or offend anyone, but of course that doesn't get us very far because sometimes love hurts and the truth can sometimes be offensive even if we don't intend to cause offense.

[32 : 35] The other thing we're left with are intuitions about what is true and right and good, which we can't really impose on anyone. But then our supposedly open and tolerant world, and it's not just here, but it's in many, many places, in our tolerant world we find a way to impose a kind of heavy-handed moralism that supposedly gives us the tools to know and to identify who the really nasty people are and who the good people are.

It's really quite remarkable, isn't it? And it offers no relief from the burden of guilt and sin. So what's our response? If we know we're sinners saved by grace, well, we really have no business running around calling out the nasty people, the haters who are on the wrong side of history, whatever that might mean.

We just need to point people to the one, the only one who can rescue us. If Jesus is indeed the truth and the way and the life, as he said, so that no one comes to the Father except through him, then we simply present him, as Leslie Newbigin said some years ago so nicely, we simply present him in all his glory, grace, and beauty.

We simply speak of that Jesus in all his glory, grace, and beauty. Well, in the light of the things that we've looked at this morning, it's in Jesus we can say that we find our identity as adopted children of God.

It's through Jesus that we have truth. How? Well, as his words abide in us, as he promised, and giving us the assurance that we have been raised with him.

[34 : 27] And it's through him and for his glory that we contemplate the wonder and the beauty of the Lord, even as we learn to count our days. So shall we pray.

Father, once again, we thank you for your word, for your Holy Spirit who convicts us, who shows us our need of you, and we ask that you would do just that once again as we continue to pray together, to hear, to attend to your word visible in the breaking of the bread.

Teach us day by day to walk with you more closely as we learn to count our days. This we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.