

From Everlasting to Everlasting

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- [0 : 0 0] St. John's Shaughnessy Church Let's turn to Psalm 90, shall we? It's on page 525 in the front part of the Bible.
- As you turn that up, I want to tell you that the first movie I ever saw in my life was Cecil B. DeMille's The Ten Commandments. It was not a particularly religious experience. I was six and I was living in the middle of Tanzania in East Africa.
- And in the local town there was a theatre that had been built during the British colonial rule. And the theatre had fallen on very hard times.
- And seeing the film was a kind of contradictory experience because it had been raining for a long time. And it was raining during the film. And the theatre was leaking.
- And the water was running to the balcony. And it ran down the balcony and over in a waterfall to the middle of the aisle and all the way down the front. We had to sit around the walls to watch The Ten Commandments.
- [1 : 3 6] And it was very difficult to hear as Charlton Heston led the people of Israel through the dry and dusty desert. But my prominent memory as a six-year-old is water all around watching the desert.
- Now the Bible tells us that the Christian experience is a contradictory one in reverse. The Christian life is one of pilgrimage through the dry and dusty wilderness.
- Longing for and thirsting for the home of God. And what is held up before us, in front of our eyes, is the waterfall of God's presence and the answer to our longings.
- And this is very precious to me. I have a deeply ambivalent sense of home. Like many of you, I was raised in a culture that was different from my parents.
- And we moved very frequently. And I really have no sense of where home is. But I have a deep sense of homesickness. And I know I'm not alone.
- [2 : 4 4] Many of the commentators describe the mood in our culture as a homeless mood. Not just in the sense that we don't feel we belong. But in the sense that all the old maps no longer work.
- We don't know who we are. We don't know where we are. And the whole apparatus of therapy has only served to deepen the problem. You might hope that Christianity has a quick and easy solution.
- But almost the opposite is true. Because the New Testament picks up this idea of wandering through the wilderness and says, that remains the shape of the Christian life today. We are pilgrims and aliens and wanderers and sojourners with a profound sense that we don't belong.
- And with an even deeper sense of spiritual homesickness. And as we come to read Psalm 90 today, Psalm 90 breathes the hot, arid air of the wilderness.
- Just look at the title there, A Prayer of Moses, The Man of God. It begins book 4 of the Psalms. And book 4 of the Psalms is all about wandering in the wilderness.

[3 : 54] It's about the exodus. And I think that is what makes verses 1 and 2 so remarkable. Lord, thou hast been our dwelling place in all generations.

Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever the world hadst been formed, from everlasting to everlasting, thou art God. Moses never made it to the promised land.

But he looked back over the generations, all the way to Abraham, and the astounding truth that he brings to mind is not that God has come to dwell with us, but that God takes us up into him to dwell in him.

It's exactly the language that Moses used at the end of the book of Deuteronomy, in another hymn where he sang, the eternal God is your refuge, your dwelling place.

And underneath are the everlasting arms. So here in the howling wilderness, with all its danger and difficulty, God stands eternal, sovereign, self-existent, as our shelter and our comfort and our protector and our preserver.

[5 : 10] Towers fall, civilizations come and go, but God remains our dwelling place. And Moses looks and sweeps across the generations of history.

He looks back before creation and he looks into the everlasting ages to come. And what does he see? He sees, thou art God. Thou art our dwelling place.

Yes, we are pilgrims and wanderers, yet we don't need to create our own place of belonging. We have a home. It is God.

It's not that God makes a home for us. It's not that he provides a home. God is our home. That is why underneath all our longings and all our sense of homesickness is the desire for communion with God.

And so what Moses does in this psalm is he leads us through the two most important questions. And the first is this, why do we need the home?

[6 : 16] Well, in verses 3 to 11 he answers that question. And the answer very simply is that we're temporary. And I wonder if you would read with me, please, verses 3 to 6.

This is the first half of the answer why we need a home. Verses 3 to 6. Thou turnest man back to dust and sayest, Turn back, O children of men, For a thousand years in thy sight are about as yesterday when it is past, Or as a watch in the night.

Thou dost sweep men away, they are like a dream, Like grass which is renewed in the morning, In the morning it flourishes and in renewed, In the evening it fades and witheth.

Verse 3 is the closest the Bible comes to the wretched Disney idea of the circle of life. It says, You were dust, and to dust you shall return.

They are the words of God to Adam and Eve in the garden. You see, it's one thing to talk about the eternity of God, But the eternity of God exposes the brevity and the frailty of our lives.

[7 : 29] See, to God, a thousand years are like yesterday. They're like a few waking moments in the night. Fifty generations, the rise and fall of civilizations, Takes no more time for God than a thought.

Which of course makes the fact that he is our home so much more remarkable, And wonderful, and critical. The trouble is that we know that we will die, We know that our lives are fragile, But it still seems to make no difference to us.

We still live as though we're going to live forever. Instead of lifting up our eyes to God, We pour ourselves into our toys and our trinkets and our triumphs, And we come up surprised when they don't really satisfy their deep longing.

We live as though that this world is all there is to existence. And the problem is that the more we set our hearts on this dry and dusty world, Hoping that we will lose that thirst, Hoping that it will quench the thirst, The more we lose the thirst for God and eternity.

While all around us, There are constant reminders that we are mortal, That our lives are transient, And without any effort whatsoever, Death comes along and sweeps us away.

[8 : 40] I'm old enough to remember the year that Arnold Schwarzenegger became Mr. Universe, For the first of three times. He's ten years older than I am, And I saw a photo of him this week, And you know there are lines on his face, And his skin is just a little looser than it used to be, Just the normal signs of ageing.

We're all like grass, Which grows and then fades. The most beautiful, The most brilliant, The strongest among us, Will fade and wither.

One of the most important days in the Australian year is called Anzac Day. It's April 25th, And it commemorates the attack on Gallipoli in 1915.

A disgraceful decision by Churchill, Where the Australian and New Zealand army acquitted themselves proudly. Each year in Sydney, The men who are still alive from that attack, Gather to the cenotaph where they lay wreaths.

There are not many left, Just a handful. That entire generation is being swept away. Just as you and I will be swept away within a few years.

[9 : 57] And the point that Moses is making is this, It's not that death is just a natural thing to expect, It is that God causes us to die.

It is God who says, Return to dust. You see, If you ask the question, Why are our lives so short? Why do we only live 80 years?

Why do we have to die? Why? The answer comes in verses 7 to 11. You see, For, he says, For, We are consumed by thy anger, By thy wrath we're overwhelmed.

Thou hast set our iniquities before thee, Our secret sins in the light of thy countenance. All our days pass away under thy wrath, Our years come to an end like a sigh. The years of our life are three score and ten, Or even by reason of strength four score, Yet their span is but toil and trouble.

Thou hast soon gone. We fly away. Who considers the power of thy anger, And thy wrath according to the fear of thee? You see, Here is the Bible's view of death.

[11 : 06] Death is not natural. It is not accidental. It is not inevitable. But it is due to God's anger. We are mortal because God is angry.

And God is angry because we are sinful. And verse 8 tells us that God has set our outward and obvious sins, And our inward and secret sins, In the light of his countenance, His face.

And every time the face of God appears in the psalm, So far that I've read, It is his loving kindness. It is his holiness and his glory.

And it is the very majesty and beauty of his face, When it's turned towards us as we really are, That shows up our gratitude and the nastiness and our pettiness.

It's the kindness of his face that exposes the grubbiness of our hearts. And it makes his wrath both irresistible and just. Listen to C.S. Lewis.

[12 : 07] He says, In the end, That face which is the delight or terror of the universe, Must be turned upon each of us, Either conferring glory inexpressible, Or inflicting shame that can never be cured or disguised.

It's not that if we're very sinful we'll lead very short lives. But it is that God turns us back to dust, Because our lives are permeated with sin. So, we live 70 years.

25,550 days. Or if we're strong, perhaps 80 years. Which is 29,200 days.

But any way you calculate it, It's not very many days at all. And they're filled with anxiety and cares and weariness and woe. And they come to an end with a groan.

And Moses says in verse 11, Who is there that takes this to heart? Who has the sense to feel God's anger and to see the truth?

[13 : 15] Who has honesty enough to allow the anger of God to penetrate their heart, To deal with the pride and idolatry that's there? Because one of the great demonstrations of sin is that we do whatever we can To avoid facing the truth of the shortness of our lives.

I shouldn't say this, But we conduct funeral after funeral here, And many of the same people come, And their eyes glaze over, And we never see them again.

We have a specific and irresistible blindness To this connection between our mortality and the wrath of God. And I think that is why this psalm is read at every funeral service in the Anglican Church.

It is there to teach us how desperately we need God to be our dwelling place. But do not forget that verses 1 and 2 stand over these verses.

And if God is offering himself as our home, And if this is the reason why we need him as our home, The second question is, How do we walk towards that home?

[14 : 27] And in verse 12, Moses turns to that question, How do we walk to the home? I think verse 12 is the pivot and the turning point of the psalm. And I'll tell you why.

If you turn back to the heading of the psalm, It says, A prayer of Moses. The man of God. But the first two thirds of the psalm are not a prayer.

They're a meditation on our need for God. But they are not the real action. They prepare us for the real action. And when we come to verse 12, Moses begins to pray.

Should we read verse 12 together? So teach us to number our days, That we may get a heart of wisdom. You may be forgiven for thinking that after such a discouraging start to the psalm, The way to walk home or the way of faith was to be a kind of passive and fatigued resignation.

Nothing is further from the truth. The heart of wisdom is not a pessimistic wet blanket. It's not a sentimental advisor saying, Oh, hold on through the tough times.

[15 : 35] It doesn't say, Just submit fatalistically to your destiny. No, no, no. It struggles with this God. And the issues of life. And I think from verse 12 onwards, There is this feisty dissatisfaction with this feeling of distance from God.

And an overwhelming desire to see the transforming work of God in our lives now. You see, at verse 12, We begin to breathe the air of verses 1 and 2 again, But now there is a difference.

We don't just simply go back to that happy declaration that God is our eternal dwelling place. Rather, we can see that the heart of wisdom holds together the fact that our lives are so brief, And we have a possibility of everlasting life.

It holds together the fact that God is our judge as well as our dwelling place. You see, the reality of our mortality and our guilt Does not change the fact that God is our eternal dwelling place.

What it should do is teach us to think about our days differently. Teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom.

[16 : 45] Number our days. He's not saying, Get the calendar and mark 25,500 minus whatever. It means working so that the reality of eternity becomes part of our everyday decisions.

It's seeing that this very heart, which will stop beating in a few years, Needs to be guided by the wisdom of God in this world. It's knowing that our time, our days come from the hand of God, And every day is a gift from him.

And having a painful dissatisfaction with anything less than the face of God. That's why verse 13 says, Return, O Lord, return, turn back to us. Have pity on thy servants.

The heart of wisdom looks past the diversions of life. And recognizes that what we do in our sin is we push God away from us. And unless he acts in pity towards us, there is no real transformation.

And so in verses 14 to 17, Moses prays that things will change. Now let's read these verses, shall we?

[17 : 53] 14 to the end of the psalm. Satisfy us in the morning with thy steadfast love. And we may rejoice in the light of all our days.

May the time and the days of our lives live us, And many years of our sins be. Let the time and the rest of our service, And the Lord of all our days, Let the fear and the Lord of all our lives, And the Sabbath of our lives, And the Savior of our lives, And the Sabbath of our lives, Satisfy us in the morning with thy steadfast love.

Which means our only true satisfaction comes from God. Friendship and communion and engagement. The only food that really satisfies is the steadfast love of God. But the reason that we pray satisfy us is because our thirst has not been quenched.

We are not satisfied. We do not yet see the face of God. Remember when Jesus said, I am the water of life, Whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst.

He does not mean that we take one drink, And that's all we need. What he means is that by drinking of him, We taste what we were made for, And we keep going back to him and drinking of him, Knowing that that is the place where our true satisfaction comes from, And heaven and earth itself cannot take that away.

[19 : 25] I mean that's why here he is in the middle of the wilderness, There's so much gladness in verses 14 and 15. The difficulty of walking through the wilderness Prepares us to bear the joy of God's presence.

A superficial heart can only experience superficial joy. It is the wounded heart that can receive deep consolation and deep gladness.

That's why it's so encouraging to read these words if God is wounding you now. If you are receiving this discipline from God, And you feel that distance from God, With Moses, ask boldly for the gladness of these verses.

And there is more. In verse 16 and 17, We pray for God's power and God's favour. They are insipid words.

The words have an aesthetic dimension to them. Glorious power is splendour and honour, Sometimes beauty. Worship the Lord in the beauty of his holiness.

[20 : 31] And the word favour is also beauty and pleasantness. The verse I read at the beginning of the service. One thing have I desired, To behold the beauty of the Lord. The wise heart prays that God will act in such a way, That his servants and his children will see the manifest beauty of God.

And the psalm ends with what I've always thought is a bit of an anticlimax. The repeated words, God establish the work of our hands, Establish the work of our hands. It always seems like a mockery when that's read at a funeral.

But again, Our eternal home presses into the reality of our daily lives. Walking through the wilderness means yielding to God's steadfast love, And his beauty, And his holiness, And his glory.

And I think this last request is a reminder that the eternal God accomplishes his will for creation through us, Through our work, Through the work of our hands.

That life is not ultimately dust and death. If it is done in God, The work's done through us and in us by our very hands.

[21 : 41] Well, Psalm 90. I thought the last 20 bars or so of the choir singing captured something of the beauty in those last verses.

But I want to conclude. This week I saw a commercial for the Microsoft video game box. It's called Xbox. A woman gives birth to a baby and the baby flies out the window like a bullet and starts flying around the world.

And as it does so, It gets older. It becomes a boy, A teen, A man, And an old man. And then it finally crashes into a grave. And then comes the punchline, Life is short, Play more.

It's a disturbing picture of the brevity of our lives. But the solution is to do whatever you can to smother and suppress the deepest longings of your heart by playing more Microsoft games.

To make the wilderness a little bit more bearable by trying to take our minds off where we really are. It's the way of the world. Psalm 90 is a prayer for all of us to pray.

[22 : 58] Lord, teach us to number our days. That we may get a heart of wisdom. And getting a heart of wisdom means looking at our world and seeing, Yes, God is our dwelling place. But we live with twin realities.

We live with our mortality and God's eternity. We live with our sin and God's dwelling. We live with God's anger and God's love.

But the heart of wisdom doesn't just settle down and live happily with those divergences. We look to God to bridge the gap. And the astounding thing for us this morning is that we know, of course, that God has decidedly acted to bridge the gap.

We so desperately need someone to come and cover our sin and to deal with God's wrath, to stand under that wrath for us, to put our sins behind God's back.

And that, of course, is exactly why Jesus came into the world. He brought eternity to us. He made it available to us through the forgiveness of our sins. He went to the cross to stand in our place so that God might receive his own anger through his son.

[24 : 10] And in his death and resurrection, the loving kindness and wrath of God meet in such a way that the grave is not just the end of a life we've played a lot of games.

But the grave is now the gate of glory. And through the cross, the eternity of God is changed from being the antithesis to our frailty to being the answer to it.

He came as God into our wilderness to bring our true home to us and to bring us to our true home. And that is why Jesus said, if anyone loves me, they will keep my word and my father will love them and we will come to them and make our home with them.

Trust in God, he said. Trust in me. In my father's house are many rooms. I go to prepare a place for you. I will come back and take you to be with me that where I am, you may be also, for I am the way.

So Lord, teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom. Amen. This digital audio file, along with many others, is available from the St. John's Shaughnessy website at www.stjohnschaughnessy.org.

[25 : 36] That address is www.stjohnschaughnessy.org.

On the website, you will also find information about ministries, worship services and special events at St. John's Shaughnessy. We hope that this message has helped you and that you will share it with others.

Thank you ■ and for that experience, come to me, we hope that you will find us for the course of the world. Thank you Emmanuel Come