

Living in the Real World

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[0 : 00] Now, as I said, we're going to be looking at Psalm 90, which is on page 496, if you have the Bibles there. So we'll read this psalm.

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. 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.

[1 : 13] 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 seventy, or even by reason of strength eighty.

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. 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 favor of the Lord our God be upon us, and establish the work of our hands upon us.

[2 : 22] Yes, establish the work of our hands. And that is God's word, and may he bless it to our hearts and to our minds. From time to time we read about ideas of putting in a time capsule things which will sum up our generation, things which will sum up this period of history, so that thousands of years from now, people of the future can discover what it was like to live in the early 21st century.

Just imagine if some such capsule were to be filled entirely with advertisements, entirely with television commercials, entirely with advertisements from glossy magazines, kind of advertisements that tell us if we use a particular perfume or particular aftershave, we will become instantly irresistible to the opposite sex.

It probably needs a bit more than that. The kind of advertisements that show beautiful people in wonderful places beside fashionable cars.

What would the people of the future imagine? They would probably imagine we were the most gullible generation of people who had ever lived on the face of the earth. They would probably imagine that we did not live in the real world.

And yet, isn't it strange that this is the very thing that, the latest of course, is Richard Dawkins and his God delusion, which basically say that those who believe in the gospel, those who take the Bible seriously, are those who don't live in the real world.

[4 : 08] This psalm is saying something very different. This psalm is asking each of us the question, the question is, are we living in the real world? Or are we living in a fantasy land?

We're going to look at this psalm for a few minutes and see how this psalm answers the question. You'll notice it begins with God. Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations, verse 1, and then down in verse 17, let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us and establish the work of our hands.

Begin with what God has made, and then at the end we ask God to bless what we have made. So are we living in the real world? If we're living in the real world, what does this mean according to this

psalm?

And first of all, it means that we have a true conception of who God is. That's really verses 1 and 2. You've been our dwelling place, the mountains were brought forth, or you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting.

You are God. It's an overwhelming sense, isn't there, of the greatness of God and of our smallness, of the enduringness of God and our frailty, of the strength of God and our vulnerability.

[5 : 25] Lord, you have been our dwelling place. Where do you feel at home? It's so important, isn't it, for people to feel at home. This psalm is saying to us, there is someone who is willing to be our home, our dwelling place.

He's been there from eternity, and he will be there to eternity. Isn't one of the problems of our society today a sense of ruthlessness, a sense of lack of community, a sense of not belonging? I'm pretty certain if you were to walk down Buchanan Street today, you would see many unhappy-looking people. And were you to know them and talk to them, you would find a major part of that unhappiness springs from the fact they don't seem to belong anywhere.

They don't seem to have anyone who cares about them. Well, our Sam is saying that not only is God great, not only is he eternal, not only is he the creator, but he actually cares enough for you and me to provide us a home, and that home is nothing more and nothing less than himself.

We matter to him. Look up at the night sky. See nature on a grand scale. Or indeed, look at it on a tiny scale, the wings of a butterfly. And we begin to feel very small, don't we?

[6 : 44] We can't do these things. We can't understand these things. The point the Samus is making is this, that God, a God like that, is not too great to care, as we might imagine.

He's too great to fail. He's too great to let us down. So in the fantasy world of today, where so much of the advertising, that's only one aspect of it, encourages us to believe that without any effort, by winning the lottery or something like that, we can suddenly, our lives can be transformed.

We can have everything we want. Here the Samus saying, true security rests on an understanding of who God is. A God who is great enough to do what he says, but also loving enough to do it for our good.

That's the first thing. Are we living in the real world? The first answer to that question is, do we believe in a God like this? A God who is both great and powerful, and yet one who is caring.

The gods of the nations surrounding ancient Israel, when this psalm was written, they were powerful. They were strong. But, there were no kindness in them, no gentleness in them.

[7 : 56] This God is powerful, and he's gentle. That's the first thing. The second thing in the next few verses, verses 3 to 12, is, we are living in the real world if we recognize who we are, who we as human beings are.

Verse 3, you return humans to dust. We are vulnerable, we are subject to death. A thousand years, verse 4, in your sight, but as yesterday, when it is past, there is a watch in the night.

This was, this picture comes from the ancient city where the watchman guarded the walls, and a watch was four hours long. Think about it. A thousand years have gone.

Think about the time from when William the Conqueror invaded the south of England. Think of the rise and fall of nations and empires. Think of the signs, the technology, the changing lifestyles.

As Isaac Watts says in his paraphrase of this, time like a never-rolling stream bears all its sons away. That thousand years has been to God as if it were simply a few hours.

[9 : 04] Whereas we, our lives are so small in comparison with that thousand years. And the psalmist uses two pictures. First of all, verse 5, you sweep them away as with a flood.

They are like a dream. Picture of a violent river in spate. We're caught up in this river. We can't get out of it. A conveyor belt that seems to be carrying us further and further and further away.

And we have no control over it. And that, of course, is a very useful thing to realize. Ultimately, we do not have control. Well, we can make certain decisions, but certain things are given to us.

Where we're born. What sex we are. What height we are. All these kind of things. These are givens. And if we are going to trust in any of these things, then we're going to end up disappointed and disillusioned.

That's the first picture. The other picture is like grass renewed in the morning. Swift disappearance of grass in the hot eastern sun. Someone said, here is the history of grass.

[10 : 06] sown, grown, mown, blown, gone. And the history of humans is not much more. Not very cheery, is it?

If you came here for a little comforting word, you're probably feeling very miserable at this moment. But, you see what the psalmist is doing. The psalmist will not allow us to live in a fantasy world. He'll not allow us to imagine that we are the masters of our fate and the captains of our souls. He's pointing us to our own vulnerability so that we will turn to God and find strength in Him. But there is more than vulnerability. We are, says verse 7, under your anger. Not just frailty, but sinfulness.

You see, if we were just frail, that would be one thing. We could, after all, be friendly with somebody who is strong. The trouble is, we are sinful.

[11:05] Verse 8, you have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins, in the light of your countenance, or your presence, as this version says. Now, we may be sure, of course, that those secret sins are not secret to Him.

They're probably secret to us because they're so much part of us that we don't notice them. We all have those kind of sins that are so much part of us. You can be pretty certain my wife knows all about my secret sins because they're so much part of me that I don't notice them.

And the psalmist is being utterly realistic. Strip away all the, if you like, all the shields we place up to life. Strip away money, wealth, possessions, status, all these kind of things.

What are we actually like? We're frail, we're vulnerable, we're under God's anger. And that is, that's a dose of realism. That's a cold shower. That is a shaking us up to be awake.

But you see, that's already the beginning of the answer. Suppose God didn't care about my sins or about your sins. That would ultimately mean that we didn't matter, wouldn't it?

[12:20] It would ultimately mean that nothing really counted. Judgment means, first of all, that God cares. God cares about what is right.

God cares about what is good. And he is, therefore, he is going to judge everything. Human life is insignificant unless it's going to be judged and assessed by the utterly fair, utterly loving judge at the end of time.

All our days, verse 9, pass away under your wrath. Years where life 70 or by reason of strength, 80. That's not an absolute statement. Many people live longer than that.

Many people die before that. It's a kind of average of human life. But even so, looking back, we're always saying this kind of thing, aren't we?

We're always saying, where's the time gone? Or if you meet a youngster whom you haven't seen for a good number of years, my goodness, how she's grown. Where's the time gone since she was a baby and so on?

[13:22] That sort of thing. It's very strange, isn't it? We never become accustomed to time, even though we live in time. Now, C.S. Lewis said, it would be strange to find a fish that was surprised that water was wet.

Unless, one day, that fish was destined to be a land animal. And you see the point. We never become accustomed to time because we're actually made for eternity.

That's why death is an outrage. That's why we talk about people dying untimely. That's why whenever death comes, whether it comes to a child or a very old person, there's always sorrow.

There's a feeling that something, something drastic, something awful has happened. So that's the realism of the psalm. God is great and we are small.

God is holy and we are sinful. God is the judge and we are those who stand before him. But the last part and verse 12, which is a, teach us to number our days.

[14:28] That doesn't, of course, mean count how many days we have because we don't know. It means realize we're not here forever and live because we're not here forever. Live because we're made for eternity.

But it's the third part of the psalm. We live in the real world if we recognize who God is. We live in the real world if we recognize who we are. But we also live in the real world if we recognize what God can make us.

And this is where this psalm becomes a gospel. Not just a dose of realism, but a gospel. The bleak picture was necessary because otherwise we'll think we live forever.

Now we know theoretically we don't, but in this generation, certainly in the western world, it's possible to pretend that we live forever. The growth in medicine, the growth in sanitation, and hygiene means that so many of us live for so much longer.

But we know that we don't. And what do we do about it? There are two things here. First of all, there is God's mercy. Return, O Lord, verse 13, have pity on your servants.

[15:34] We sang a few moments ago, praise the Lord though we provoke him. He restrains his angry hand. We are surely not rewarded as our countless sins demand.

There at the very heart of the gospel is that God himself has provided a way back for him, sending Jesus Christ to take our place, to take on him the anger that we deserve from God.

And by being forgiven, by being justified by him, then we can share in God's own life. Satisfies in the morning verse with your steadfast love.

This word steadfast love is associated with the idea of covenant. God pledges himself to his people. He's committed by promises which he cannot and will not break.

So you see, in the midst of all this, God is merciful. God is gracious. And that's one of the things many people find so difficult. They don't actually want a merciful.

[16:36] God. They want a God who's going to pat them on the back. They don't actually want to go to heaven when they discover they have to sing worthy is the lamb. And what they actually want to sing is worthy am I.

Now that's not living in the real world. Living in the real world we realize we are sinners. We need God's mercy. That God's mercy is open to us. But there is far more than mercy.

Mercy, if you like, takes away our sins, takes away the barriers. There is God's tremendous generosity. Verse 15. 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. Then this last phrase of the psalm repeated, establish the work of our hands. You see, we are frail, we are vulnerable.

We fly away and we are soon forgotten. But you see what the psalmist is saying. The psalmist is saying that the Lord by his mercy, by his generosity, will actually so work in our lives that what's done for him will last into eternity.

[17:47] Not everything we do will last into eternity, but the psalmist says if we live in this real world, if we believe in this God, the God who is the judge, but also the merciful one, the God who is the saviour, the God who is the generous God, what we do for him will last into eternity.

So are we living in the real world? This psalm has given us, this psalm has given us a picture of what it means to live in the real world. That's a great picture.

If you're young and life opening up in front of you, what could be better than to give your life to this God? If you're middle-aged, frustrated, tired, weary with the rat race, live in the real world, give your life to this God.

If you're old and cynical, drop your cynicism and look at this God who is merciful, who is gracious, and who is generous. Let's pray. Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations.

We pray indeed that by your grace, by your generosity, you will indeed establish the work of our hands. Help us to live the rest of our lives in the light of your presence, living in the real world and praising you, the true God.

[19:11] Amen.