

God of Eternity

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[0 : 00] By your wrath we are dismayed. You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your presence. For our days pass away under your wrath. We bring our years to an end like a sigh.

Years of our life are seventy or even by reason of strength eighty. Yet their span is but trouble and sorrow. 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.

[1 : 09] 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.

Amen. This is the word of the Lord and may he bless it to our hearts and minds. Let's pray. Lord God, as time rushes on, as we are already well into a new year, we pray indeed that you will teach us to number our days, that we may have a heart of wisdom, that you will teach us our vulnerability and frailty and at the same time your utter dependability and the way that that frailty and vulnerability can be caught up in your eternal purposes and thus have effects long beyond our time. And so speak to us, Lord, in these few moments as we have drawn aside from the normal concerns of everyday life and speak to us in such a way that you will open our eyes, that you will enlighten our minds, that you will warm our hearts and that you will help us to walk in your ways all the days of our life.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. You know, it's an odd thing, isn't it, that we never get used to time.

Think about the phrases that we use all the time. Goodness me, it can't be ten years since we last met. Surely, my goodness me, how she's grown.

[2 : 53] And of course, when we meet somebody after ten, or even worse, after 15 years, what we are thinking is, oh goodness me, how old they look. We're getting to look in the mirror and realizing that they're thinking exactly the same thing.

Time is relative, isn't it? I mean, a child on the 20th of December, the five days till Christmas Day, seem an eternity. On the other hand, a mature person, looking back over the last ten years, actually ten years since we came to Glasgow, it seems to have passed in a flash.

C.S. Lewis says, it would be very odd if we came across a fish that never became accustomed to the fact that water was wet. And he went on to say, it would be unless the fish was one day destined to be a land animal.

Why is it we never become accustomed to time? Because we weren't made for time. We were made for eternity. We weren't made simply for the years of our life in this world.

We were made for the world that is to come. And that's why I'm calling this God of Eternity. This is about the eternity of God and our weakness and frailty.

[4 : 12] And I want to make three points about this. First of all, verses 1 to 2, who God is. O Lord.

And Lord, of course, is the covenant name, Yahweh, the God who has committed himself to his people, the one who makes promises that he cannot and will not break.

And it describes the prayer of Moses, the man of God, which makes it probably one of the very oldest Psalms in the Psalter. Anyway, this is the God who is, first of all, our security.

Lord, you have been our dwelling place. Most of us feel secure that we have a home to go to, don't we?

We like to feel at home. And very often in our lives, we say, well, I don't really feel at home here. This is not, this is not really where I belong.

[5 : 14] And if you moved around a lot, as I have, you've probably lived in some places you felt more at home than others. No, I'm not going to tell you. But the point is that God is, in other words, where we live.

Not just an occasional help. Not just somewhere to return to or to cry out to in times of difficulty. And not just for a particular generation.

You have been our dwelling place in all generations. Every generation of God's people have found in God. Not just their refuge, but their dwelling place.

Now, in our world, there's a great sense of ruthlessness and alienation. There's a great sense of people not belonging. And, of course, we live in a very, very uncertain world.

An uncertain world politically. An uncertain world personally. And it's very easy to feel ruthless and to feel afraid. And to feel afraid of the future.

[6 : 18] So, God is our security. Where do we live? Ultimately, we live in God himself. He is our eternal home. But secondly, he is greater than his creation.

Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever he had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting, you are God. Now, in our world, we know a great deal more about the how of the world.

There's a great deal we know about creation. Well, I'm not saying I know. I'm no scientist. But if you watch programs, let's say, by somebody like David Attenborough, or programs about astronomy, it's quite astonishing how much people know about the physical environment we live in, and about the physical universe that surrounds us.

But God was there before that creation was made. One of the things we need to remember is, science can only take us back to the moment when creation began.

It can't take us back before that. It can only take us back to the moment when the great creating word said, let there be light. And anything else has to be mere speculation on the part of scientists and philosophers.

[7 : 42] People talk about the Big Bang, and, you know, the kind of explosion of gases that brought the creation into being. I don't mind using that because I read an article the other day by the Astronomer Royal, who also uses that phrase.

So I assume that the Astronomer Royal knows what he's talking about. But the point is, God is there before the created world. He made it.

He is a God who is from everlasting to everlasting. In other words, the God of the past, the present, and the future. When he revealed himself to Moses, he wrote this psalm, he revealed himself as, I am who I am.

Perhaps even it can be translated, I will be who I will be. At no point in time, past, present, or future, is he not there. At no point in this universe can you escape from him.

David is to talk in Psalm 139 about where can I flee from your spirit? Go up to heaven, right down to the depths of Sheol, and you are there. So who God is?

[8 : 49] God is our security. God is greater than the creation that he made. And because of this, that means there is nothing in all creation that can ultimately hinder his purposes.

Sometimes his purposes seem to be thwarted, both for creation, for communities, and for individuals. But ultimately, he is the one who works everything out according to the purpose of his will.

Secondly, in verses 3 to 12, who we are. That's who God is. Who are we? And there's a total contrast. We are dust.

Not very flattering, is it? You return man to dust. That's the course. It's quoting from Genesis. You are dust, and to dust you will return. We are not eternal.

We are not from everlasting to everlasting. We were born on a particular date. We will die on a particular date. But God is from everlasting.

[9 : 49] So first of all, we are vulnerable. And the first thing is, even the longest human life is short. A thousand years in your sight are but as yesterday, when it is past, or as a watch in the night.

A watch lasted for about four hours. Now, think of the last thousand years. Probably greater changes than at any other period in human history, and particularly in the last 50, 60 years. Rise and fall of empires and nations. Look at a map of the world a thousand years ago. It would look very, very different to what it does now. And of course, science, technology, all the lifestyle, the...

And of course, the way people are forgotten. I mean, after all, people... It's often said, graveyards are full of indispensable people.

People are forgotten. I'd make most of my ministry up to almost the time I retired. I used to work primarily with students. There's nothing like working with students to make you realize how easily forgotten you are.

[11:08] You go to a place where you've been well-known. Well, I've never heard a few. You say, Should I have heard a few? And I mean, this is what happens. Walk around the graveyard.

Look at the gravestones. Most people who have ever lived have been forgotten. Oh, there's a few names that... A few names that are remembered.

Like Shakespeare. I'm awfully glad that name is remembered. But that's another story. But then, most people simply disappear. And there's two pictures used here. The picture of the flood, the violent river in spate.

Time like a never-rolling stream bears all its suns away. And then the swift disappearance of grass in the hot eastern sun. Like grass that is renewed in the morning.

In the morning it flourishes and is renewed. In the evening it fades and withers. Someone said, this is the history of grass. Sown, grown, mown, blown, gone.

[12:11] And the history of humans is not much more. Now in one sense that's true. And I know what you're thinking. You're thinking it's awfully morbid. I didn't come here to be discouraged and depressed.

But this is what the scripture reminds us. That we are vulnerable. That we will not be here forever. And that when we go, people will soon forget us. This is just a fact of life.

So what are we? We are weak. We are vulnerable. We are vulnerable. And we don't live forever. But the other problem is we are sinful.

And this is the real problem. The real problem is not so much our frailty. Not so much the fact that we don't live forever. But the fact that we are sinful.

Verse 7, 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 countenance.

[13:17] God's judgment. Now, iniquities iniquities is more our sinful nature. The kind of nature that causes us to commit sins.

Now, secret sins I don't think here are so much sins that we commit and try to hide. Rather, I think it's sins we become so accustomed to we're unaware of them. The kind of sins that those who live with us are perfectly well aware of but we're not aware of.

I think that is the point. We are sinful and judgment mean and there is going to be judgment. Now, strangely enough, that is a note of hope.

If God is going to judge then that means we matter to God, doesn't it? It means that human life is not futile. That human life is not absolutely in vain because God is going to judge.

All our days pass away under your wrath during our years. Years of our life are 70 or even by reason of strength 80. Now, as you well know, many people live a lot longer than that.

[14:26] Others sadly die very young. This is more a kind of average statement about human life and of course the answer to that is not actually endlessly trying to prolong human life but looking to God and his goodness beyond it.

One of the early missionaries to the north of England, Bede, went to the court of the king of Northumberland and told him the gospel, the gospel of the cross and the gospel of the resurrection. And he came said, can your new religion give us any hope for death and after death? And just at that moment, a little sparrow fluttered into the hall and for a moment or two flew around in the firelight and then vanished into the darkness.

And the king said, human life is like that. We come in from the dark, we are here for a little while and then we vanish into the dark again. Has your new religion anything to say about that?

Of course, it is the gospel that has something to say about that, isn't it? It is only the gospel that has something to say about it. The gospel tells us of one who went through death, who defeated death

and opened the kingdom of heaven and gave eternal life to all who will believe.

[15 : 49] And that ultimately is the only answer. And now, teach us to number our days. Now, obviously, that doesn't mean we know how many days we have left.

Obviously not. We don't. We're totally ignorant of whether we're young or old or middle-aged, we're totally ignorant about the number of days we have.

I think what it means is remember that every day could be your last. Every day matters. And that means every day matters enormously since we don't know what will happen.

But we know that we are not immortal. So, teach us that we may get a heart of wisdom. So, who God is? Eternal, dependable, the one we are at home with and the one who one day will take us to his home.

Who are we? We are vulnerable, we are sinful. But the last part of the psalm, verses 13 to 17, what happens when these two realities come together?

[16 : 58] What happens when the God of eternity comes into contact with our vulnerable lives? Yes, it's a very bleak picture. You're not here for long.

As well-known speaker Don Carson in one of his more pastoral moments said, life's hard and then you die. Well, I can't say that's really very cheery but in a sense this is what the psalm is saying. But when you bring these two realities together, the reality of the eternity of God and the mortality of humans, then we find what God can make us.

God is not too great to care. God is too great to fail. that is the point. If he is our dwelling place, if he is from everlasting to everlasting, then ultimately there is hope and there is a future.

And just two things. First of all, God's mercy satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love.

That's the great covenant, the great word about the covenant love of God that commits him to his people and that we may rejoice and be glad all our days.

[18 : 16] See, it's not a contradiction saying number our days and rejoicing and be glad. See, if we only number our days, we're going to become desperately gloomy, aren't we?

If we only rejoice and be glad, then when things go wrong, we're going to be utterly depressed. The two things belong together because the two things are realities. Our humanness is a reality but so is the glorious future which God has promised to those who believe in him.

There's God's mercy. And then there is God's generosity. 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, your glorious power to their children. In other words, God doesn't just remake the past and help in the future.

What's done for God lasts into eternity. Now, we are so accustomed to seeing our lives vanish and disappear. Many things we thought well established simply seem to have gone nowhere.

[19 : 24] The point is that whatever is done for God will last into eternity. We may never see it in our lifetimes. But, that's why Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15, therefore, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord because you know that your work is not in vain in the Lord.

It's hard often, it's difficult, it's tough, and we are vulnerable. But, ultimately, if we trust in the Lord, if we believe in his good purposes for us, then there is a future.

And that really is good news. Whatever age you happen to be, whatever circumstances in life may be happening at the moment, that is a gospel worth believing and a God worth trusting.

Amen. Let's pray. Oh, God, our help in ages past, our hope for years to come. Father, we thank you that you are our home.

And even when we feel ruthless in this world, that you still care. We pray you will forgive our many sins and that you will indeed teach us to number our days that we may gain a heart of wisdom.

[20 : 48] We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.