

O God, Our Help in Ages Past

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Preacher: Rev. Murdo M Campbell

[0 : 00] Well, if we could, with the Lord's help and the Lord's enabling this morning, if we could turn back to that portion of Scripture that we read, the book of Psalms, Psalm 90.

The book of Psalms, Psalm 90. We're going to read again from the beginning.

Psalm 90 from the beginning. A prayer of Moses, the man of God. 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.

From everlasting to everlasting, you are God. As you know, this morning, we stand on the threshold of a new year.

The door to 2022 has now closed behind us. And before us is the open door to 2023. And undoubtedly, standing on the threshold of a new year, it causes a variety of emotions.

[1 : 24] Because at the beginning of a new year, we're often very sensitive. We're often very sentimental about the year or even the years that have gone by. And also the year that lies ahead.

And for some, a new year fills them with excitement and enthusiasm. The thought of a new beginning, a new build, a new born. But for others, a new year is often overshadowed by ongoing sickness or suffering or sorrow.

And you know, friends, I think I say it every year. Needless to say, bringing in the new year is happy for some, but heartbreaking for others.

And so what do we do? Where do we go? Who do we turn to?

And you come to Psalm 90. And here we're reminded and reassured that there's only one we can turn to. Because on the threshold of a new beginning, that's who Moses turned to.

[2 : 31] He turned to the Lord in prayer. And you know, that's what I love about Psalm 90. Boys and girls, Psalm 90 is 3,500 years old.

3,500 years old. It's the oldest Psalm in the Bible. And yet it has for us and it holds before us the most relevant and the most reassuring truth.

That at a new beginning, the Lord is the only one we can look to. At a new beginning, the Lord is the only one we can look to. And what Moses prays about here in Psalm 90 is something we should all pray about at the beginning of a new year.

Because Moses prays about our constant. He prays about our contrast. And he prays about our concern. Moses prays about our constant, our contrast, and our concern.

They are our three headings this morning. He prays about our constant. He says in verse 1, Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations.

[3 : 36] Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting, you are God. You know, in 1708, the popular preacher and hymn writer, Isaac Watts, he wrote this well-known hymn, O God, our help in ages past.

And Isaac Watts, he's said to have written over 750 hymns and Christmas carols, some of which are very familiar to us. We considered one of his Christmas carols recently. We saw that it was based upon the words of Psalm 98, where it was, Joy to the world, the Lord has come.

Let earth receive our King. Let every heart prepare Him room. And heaven and nature sing. We're also familiar with Isaac Watts' cross-centered hymn, where he says, When I surveyed the wondrous cross, upon which the Prince of Glory died.

And you know, the thing about Isaac Watts' hymns and carols is that they're all Christ-centered.

They're all gospel-focused because they're all biblical. And that's certainly true about this hymn, O God, our help in ages past.

Because, O God, our help in ages past, it's based upon the words of this Psalm, Psalm 90. But what's interesting is that from a very young age, Isaac Watts had a gift for poetry and hymnody.

[5 : 01] When he was a child, he was once questioned by his father after family worship. They had just had family worship, and his father asked him straight away, Why did you have your eyes open during the prayer?

And young Isaac Watts responded in rhyme, saying, A little mouse, for want of stares, ran up a rope to say its prayers. And needless to say, little Isaac Watts, he received the belt for what he told his father, to which he cried, O Father, Father, pity take, and I will no more verses make.

But Isaac Watts did write many more verses, and that's clearly seen in this hymn that he wrote here. Because he wrote in the opening verse, O God, our help in ages past, our hope for years to come, our shelter from the stormy blast, and our eternal home.

And you know, Isaac Watts, he expresses there the emotion. He expresses the emotion of Moses' prayer here in Psalm 90.

And I say that because Moses prayed these words in Psalm 90 towards the end of his life. Moses, as you know, he had been called and commissioned and commanded by the Lord to lead nearly three million Israelites out of slavery and bondage in Egypt.

[6 : 24] And by the Lord's goodness and grace, Moses did that. But he also led the Israelites through the wilderness for 40 years. And now at the end of this 40-year period, Moses and the Israelites, they're standing on the banks of the River Jordan.

They're on the threshold of this new beginning because the promised land is before them. But the thing about Moses is that Moses knows that his days, his days are numbered because he's not going to enter the promised land with them.

And so Moses does in Psalm 90, the only thing he can do, he prays for them. He prays for them. Moses, the man of God, prays that the Lord who has been there constant throughout the past 40 years will continue to be there constant as they cross the threshold into the promised land.

And you know, amazingly, Isaac Watts, he catches this theme. He expresses that emotion in his hymn. He says, O God, our help in ages past, our hope for years to come, our shelter from the stormy blast, and our eternal home.

Under the shadow of thy throne, thy saints have dwelt secure. Sufficient is thine arm alone, and our defense is sure.

[7 : 47] And you know, it seems to me that Moses, he came, as he came to the threshold and this new beginning for the Israelites, Moses became more and more aware of all the changes that had taken place in his lifetime.

And yet in the midst of all of these changes, he confesses that the Lord is his only constant. The Lord was the only constant. And you know, for some people, they think it's wrong to look back as a Christian.

Because as a heaven-bound Christian, you must always look forward and move forward and press forward. And that's true. But it's also good to look back.

Because it's only when we look back that we can see and be sure of the Lord's sovereign hand in everything. It's only when we look back that we can see that the Lord was there even when we thought he wasn't there.

It's only when we look back that we can actually trace the perfect plan and path and purpose of the Lord's providence in our lives. And that's what Moses does here in Psalm 90.

[9 : 01] He's standing on the banks of the River Jordan. He's on this great threshold looking into the promised land. But as Moses looks back, he can trace the Lord's hand.

He can see the perfect plan and path and purpose of the Lord's providence in his life. And he can see that the Lord was his only constant. Because the Lord was there.

The Lord was there when he was laid in a baby basket of bulrushes in the River Nile. The Lord was there speaking to him from the burning bush. The Lord was there during all these plagues in Egypt. The Lord was there during the first Passover in Egypt. The Lord was there when the Israelites crossed through the Red Sea. The Lord was there satisfying the Israelites with manna from heaven and water from the rock.

The Lord was there when they received the law at Mount Sinai. When they were given the tabernacle to construct. The Lord was there. He was always there leading his people for 40 years as a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night.

[10 : 08] My friend, as Moses looked back, all he could see was the hand of the Lord. He could trace the perfect plan and path and purpose of the Lord's providence in his life.

And it was only by looking back that he stands on this threshold and he's encouraged and enabled to look forward. And as he looks forward, he prays in Psalm 90.

He says, 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. My friend, Moses was praying. He was praying, Lord, even though we have been faithless for 40 years, you have remained faithful.

You have remained steadfast and sure. You have remained trustworthy and true. And despite all the changes, you have been our constant. Despite all the changes, you have been our constant.

[11:16] And you know, my friend, looking, Moses looked back in order to look forward. And that's what we must do as we stand on the threshold of a new year.

We must look back over 2022 and further. And when we look back, we can trace the perfect plan and path and purpose of the Lord's providence in our lives.

And for some of us, in 2022, there were exciting encouragements. There were new beginnings.

There were new builds. There were newborns. For others, there was disappointing and discouraging events.

Sickness and suffering and sorrow. And undoubtedly, with every passing year, there are changes that take place in our lives. But these changes that we saw in 2022, they were changes that not only took place personally, they were changes that we saw publicly too.

In 2022, we witnessed the end of COVID restrictions, the start of the war in Ukraine, the cost of living crisis, the death of our longest reigning monarch, and three prime ministers.

[12:33] Do you know, as we look back, there have been many changes in the past year. But as Moses reminds us, despite all the changes, the Lord never changes.

He proclaims to us in His Word, I am the Lord. I change not. The Lord is our constant. The Lord is our constant, which is why we must pray with Moses in Psalm 90 and say, Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations.

Before the mountains were brought forth, wherever you had formed, the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting, you are God. And so as Moses prays in Psalm 90, he prays about our constant.

But then he goes on to pray about our contrast. Our constant and our contrast. He says, Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations.

Before the mountains were brought forth, wherever 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, but as yesterday when it is past, or as a watch in the night.

[13:53] You know, as Moses stood on the bank of the River Jordan looking over into the Promised Land. And as we said, although Moses wasn't going to enter the Promised Land with the Israelites, he did the only thing he could do for them now.

He prayed for them. But you know, in my mind, I can almost see Moses standing on the banks of the River Jordan. He's on the threshold, they're on the threshold of this new beginning.

And Moses is praying for the Israelites. He's praying for this people that the Lord has given to him. But in my mind, he's praying just as it's described in the book of Deuteronomy.

When Moses, the man of God, the leader of the Lord's people for 40 years, he's standing before the people with his hands raised over them, just like he did at the battle against the Amalekites, where Aaron and Hur held up his arms throughout the battle.

But here Moses, he prays for the people and he raises his hands to remind and reassure them that on the threshold of this new beginning, the eternal God is our refuge and underneath are his everlasting arms.

[15:07] The eternal God is our refuge and underneath are his everlasting arms. And you know, in my mind, like Aaron did before him, Moses, when he prays, he prays and he pronounces this benediction of blessing over the people and he says to them, the Lord bless you and keep you.

The Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you. The Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.

You know, my friend, Moses prayed for the people as they stood on the threshold of a new beginning. And he prayed that the Lord would bless them and keep them.

And you know, what can we say about Moses' prayer? Moses was someone who was looking not to the things that are seen, but to the things that are unseen.

For the things that are seen are temporal. The things that are unseen are eternal. eternal. And Moses looked to what is unseen and eternal because he knew that we cannot rest and rely upon our own strength and our own stability and our own security.

[16 : 27] No, we must look outside of ourselves. We must set our affection on things above. We must lift our eyes heavenward. We must come to the throne of grace.

We must focus upon the one who is unseen and the one who remains eternal because the reality is, the reality is, says Moses, there is this great contrast and this great chasm that exists between our eternal and everlasting God and us.

Momentary mankind. And that contrast, it comes across so clearly in Moses' prayer because Moses, he prays that and he reminds us that the Lord is the creator of the cosmos.

He's the one who upholds the universe by the word of his power. He's the one who spoke this world into being. He's the one who said, let there be and it was.

And it was all very good. But when Moses prays here, he not only prays knowing that he's speaking to his creator God, he's also praying knowing that he's speaking to his covenant God a God who is infinite, eternal, and unchangeable.

[17 : 44] A God who has existed before time began or before space existed. He's praying to the one before, as he says in verse 2, before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting, you are God.

you know, Moses, he's praying, Lord, you are the alpha and the omega. You are the first and the last. You are the beginning and the end.

You are divine. We are of the dust. You are divine, but we are of the dust. You formed us and fashioned us from the dust to the ground.

You made us and molded us in your own image and likeness. Our origin, our genesis, our beginning. It wasn't some random chance of biology. No, Lord, it began with you because it's in you that we live and move and have our being.

You are divine. We are of the dust. We are of the dust and our curse, says Moses, our curse is that from the dust we came and to the dust we shall return.

[18 : 59] From the dust we came and to the dust we shall return. He says, verse 3, you return man to dust and say, return no children of man for a thousand years in your sight but as yesterday when it has passed 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 and in the evening it fades and it withers. Moses is praying, Lord, with you one day is as a thousand years and a thousand years is one day. You're not bound by time because you are boundless.

You are infinite, eternal, and unchangeable. But our life, our life, Lord, is momentary. Our life is transient and temporal.

Our life is like a vapor that soon vanishes. Our life is like a tale that is quickly told. Our life, he says, is like a flower that flourishes in the morning but fades in the evening.

[20 : 05] And you know, my friend, what a contrast. What a contrast he sets before us that we are so unlike our great God.

What a contrast. And it's that contrast that Isaac Watts picks up on. He expresses the emotion that Moses is expressing here. Verse 3, Before the hills in order stood, or earth received her frame from everlasting thou art God to endless years the same.

A thousand ages in thy sight are like an evening gone, short as the watch that ends the night before the rising sun.

And you know, it's this contrast that brings us to our concern. It's the contrast that brings us to our concern.

Because in Psalm 90, Moses, he's praying about our constant. He prays about our contrast. And then he prays lastly about our concern. Our concern.

[21 : 12] Look at verse 9. 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, but even by reason of strength, eighty.

Yet their span is but toil and trouble. They are soon gone and we fly away. Twenty-three marks one hundred and eighty years since the free church came into being.

The disruption, the free church disruption took place in 1843, which is when the free church left the Church of Scotland over the issue of state interference in the national Kirk.

God willing, around April and May I'd like us to consider some of our church history. And what led to the disruption in 1843. But as you know, one of the important and influential figures during the disruption was our first moderator in the free church.

That was the reverend Dr. Thomas Chalmers. But before Chalmers was converted, for many years he was a professor of mathematics in St. Andrew's University.

[22 : 30] But after he became a Christian and subsequently became a minister, he was speaking one day and he said that in all his years as a professor, there was one mathematical equation he had never, ever considered.

That was the shortness of time and the length of eternity. The shortness of time and the length of eternity.

And you know, that's what Moses is praying about here in these verses. He's reminding us that our greatest concern is the shortness of time and the length of eternity.

Our greatest concern should be the shortness of time and the length of eternity. Because Moses, he's already reminded us about our constant. That the Lord is our only constant in our ever-changing lives.

Moses has reminded us about the contrast. That the Lord is divine and we are of the dust. From the dust we came and to dust we shall return. Therefore, Moses says here, our greatest concern should be the shortness of time and the length of eternity.

[23 : 48] It says in verse 10, the years of our life are 70 or even by reason of strength, 80. Yet their span is but toil and trouble and they are soon gone and we fly away.

Now Moses, he lived until he was 120 years old. That's how old he was when he prayed these words in Psalm 90. And yet even at that age, Moses knew that he had more years behind him than before him.

Moses could also count more of his friends and his relatives among the dead than among the living. my friend, like Moses, our greatest concern should be the shortness of time and the length of eternity.

That's why Isaac Watts, he expresses the emotion. He writes, verse 5, time like an ever-rolling stream bears all its sons away. They fly forgotten as a dream, dies at the opening day.

Time like an ever-rolling stream. stream. What does it do? It bears all its sons away.

[25 : 09] My friend, time is not our friend. Time is our foe. Time is our enemy because we are all bound by time.

time. Therefore, as Moses is reminding us, our greatest concern should be the shortness of time and the length of eternity.

Our greatest concern should be the shortness of our time and where we will spend an eternity. And this is why Moses, as he stood before the Israelites on the threshold of a new beginning, he begins to pray.

And he's praying on behalf of the congregation. And what does he pray? Verse 12, Teach us to number our days that we may apply our heart unto wisdom.

Teach us to number our days that we may apply our heart unto wisdom. You know, my friend, I don't think there's a better prayer and a better petition to go into this new year with than that one.

[26 : 14] Lord, teach us to number our days that we may apply our heart unto wisdom. Because like every year before it, if 2022 has taught us anything, it should have taught us about the frailty and the fragility of life.

If 2022 has taught us anything, it should have taught us about the frailty and fragility of life. Teach us to number our days and apply our heart unto wisdom.

And you know, with this, I'll close this morning. Maybe you saw it, that at the end of every year, the BBC publishes a list of notable deaths.

It's a list of famous people who have died throughout the year. And the list of notable deaths for 2022, it included, first and foremost, our longest reigning monarch, Queen Elizabeth II.

There was also mentioned in it the actress Olivia Newton-John, who starred in Grease, June Brown, who played Dot Cotton in EastEnders, Robbie Coltrane played character in Harry Potter, there was the singers Meatloaf and Darius, there was the BBC breakfast presenter, Bill Turnbull, there were the sports heroes that we all knew about, Pele, Doddy Weir, Shane Warren.

[27 : 43] They all died in 2022 because, as Moses says, their days were numbered. But you know, when I first read that list of notable deaths in 2022, I thought, well, it's very interesting, but I didn't

know any of them personally.

Never met them. I didn't know who they were, where they lived, or didn't know much about them. Then I started thinking about all the people in our congregation and all the people in our community who died in 2022.

I'm not going to name them, but we know them. We knew who they were, where they lived. we know who their family are today.

And for us, they were all notable people. They were notable people. And although it's heartbreaking to say it, all these notable people in our congregation and in our community, they died in 2022 because, as Moses says, their days were numbered.

Their days were numbered. And that's what Moses is reminding us this morning. Our days are numbered, which is why, my friend, on the threshold of a new year, our greatest concern should be the shortness of time and the length of eternity.

[29 : 23] Lord, teach us to number our days, that we may apply our heart unto wisdom. Do you know, my unconverted friend, whether here this morning or at home, I need not remind you, as we reminded the children, we do not know what a day nor an hour will bring in 2023.

So my plea to you is, begin 2023 the right way. begin 2023 the right way. Seek the Lord while he may be found.

Seek the Lord while you are on mercy's ground. Seek the Lord while he may be found. Seek the Lord whilst you are on mercy's ground.

And you know, my Christian friend, I need not remind you either of what the great missionary C.T. Stud once said, only one life will soon be past.

Only what's done for Christ will last. Lord, teach us to number our days, that we may apply our heart unto wisdom.

[30 : 46] wisdom. Apply our heart unto wisdom. The wisdom of God is Christ and him crucified. The wisdom of God is following the words of the gospel.

Come, come unto me. Lord, teach us to number our days, that we may apply our heart unto wisdom. That should be our prayer as we go into 23.

because as Isaac Watts prayed, he said, O God, our help in ages past, our hope for years to come, be thou our guard while troubles last, and our eternal home.

May the Lord bless these thoughts to us. Let us pray. O Lord, our gracious God, O teach us to number our days, that we may apply our heart unto wisdom.

Teach us, Lord, we pray, to have that eternal perspective, to live life always ready. And Lord, we pray that we would live life for Jesus, living with him, looking to him, leaning upon him, knowing that he is the author and he is the finisher of our faith.

[32 : 10] Bless, Lord, thy truth to us. Help us, we pray, as we go into a new year, that thou wouldest keep our going out and our coming in from this time forth and even forevermore.

Take away our iniquity, receive us graciously, for Jesus' sake. Amen. Amen. Well, we're going to bring our service to a conclusion by singing the words of that psalm, Psalm 90.

Psalm 90, page 350, in the Scottish Psalter, the blue psalm book, singing from verse 10 down to the end of the verse, Mark 12.

Psalm 90 and verse 10. But before we sing, three questions, you got them all, Kate, yeah?

All of them. Who wrote Psalm 90? What's his name? Moses, yeah? Moses wrote Psalm 90? What was Moses' prayer?

[33 : 19] How old is Psalm 90? 3,500 years old, yeah? 3,500 years old.

So it's the oldest psalm in the Bible. And what are today's headings? So Moses prays about our constant, yeah?

Our contrast. The adults, come on, adults help out too. Our constant, our contrast, and our concern, yeah?

Our constant, our contrast, and our concern. So well done. So we're going to sing those verses in Psalm 90.

Psalm 90 at verse 10. Three score and ten years do sum up, our days and years we see, but if by reason of more strength than some four score they be, yet doth the strength of such old men, but grief and labor prove, for it is soon cut off and we fly hence and soon remove.

[34 : 24] Down to the end of the double verse mark 12 of Psalm 90 to God's praise. Psalm 90 Please go and ten years to sum up our days and years we see, what if by reason of more strength

than some four score they be, yet deathless strength of such old men, love, but grief and labor prove, for it is soon cut off and we blind heads and soon remove.

who knows the power of thy world according to thy fear, so is thy heart, Lord, teach thou us our hands and mine to bear, and so to cut our days and we our hearts may still apply, to there thy wisdom and thy truth, that we may live thereby.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all now and forevermore. Amen.