

# Regaining a Bigger View of God

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[ 0 : 00 ] Thank you, Simona. My name is Bruce, if we haven't met. And it's a pleasure and privilege to begin what I believe, Ian, as a week of several weeks in the fourth book of the Psalter.

The Psalms, if you're not aware, are the liturgy or the songbook of the temple worship. So they bring their own unique problems, their poetry. But of course, when we read it in English, we don't really have access to the poetic text that it was written in, so some of that can just get lost on us. But I always find it a really amazing thing to do, to spend time in this songbook, which ultimately, I understand, is the Lord Jesus Christ's songbook.

The whole sweep of these 150 songs make a very long arc from Psalm 1 to Psalm 150. But let me pray for us as we begin this week with Psalm 90.

Loving Father, we thank you for these words, words that are simultaneously words from people to you, in praise, in worship, in prayer, in mourning, in weeping, in rejoicing.

[ 1 : 08 ] But at the same time, words from you to us, words that address us, words that command us, words that encourage us, words that comfort us.

We ask that your blessing would rest on us as we listen to you this morning and continue to listen to you over the next few weeks as we explore the Psalms.

Please do that now. In Jesus' name, Amen. Now, there's a BBC kids' program that's made it all the way across to Australia, across the waters.

I imagine some of you might be familiar with it. Grandpa in My Pocket. If anyone can tell, I have children, I see these things. It has the English actor James Bolan as Grandpa.

Grandpa. And Grandpa owns a magic shrinking cap, which initially only his 10-year-old grandson knows about. And the cap enables him to shrink down to about four or five inches high, and he runs very fast, and he brings objects to life.

[ 2 : 13 ] It's just terrific kids' TV. That perfect combination of the everyday with a very wild imagination. But I think Grandpa in My Pocket captures perfectly how a lot of people think about God.

A lot of people think of God as this friendly, portable old man that you can take with you wherever you go. He has magic powers, and you can be entertained by him once a week on Channel Church. Perhaps that's slightly exaggerated, but not much. Not much. It is very easy, I think, to have a picture of God that is considerably smaller than he actually is, and we have this tendency to reduce him, if not to a grandpa in our pocket, to something at least not much bigger than that.

And it doesn't correspond to reality, does it? This very serious problem is really at the heart of Psalm 90. It raises the question, how big is your picture of God?

It's really important, because when we allow our picture of God to shrink down four or five inches high, it traps God's people, and it brings us into a trap that we fall into over and over again, and it's a trap that we see the psalmist climbing out of through Psalm 90.

[ 3 : 37 ] So as Psalm 90 unfolds, we see him reflecting on how big God actually is. Now he's speaking on behalf of God's people, as they have made this collective experience of regaining a picture of just how big God is.

And it unfolds in these poetic meditations on three aspects of God's bigness, his eternity, his holiness, and his love.

And the first thing that the psalmist sees is God's eternity. He sees again that God simply is there. He doesn't come, he doesn't go, God is simply there. But the interesting thing, I think, is what reminds him of this. And he begins to regain this sight of God's eternity by realizing how ephemeral and transient that he is.

Now it's nearly 20 years since Kate and I got married. It doesn't really feel that long ago. Kate still kind of looks the same. I look in the mirror and realize it is, in fact, a very long time ago.

[ 4 : 50 ] But I'm told even after 50 years, it can feel just like yesterday. Is that the case? Peter and Terry? I've got some more nods over here too. It might have been back in the Jurassic era, but in a very real sense, it feels like yesterday.

And that's the feeling that gets the psalmist thinking about God's eternity. He begins to reflect on how quickly a whole lifetime passes.

And in verse 10 he writes, The length of our days is 70 years, or 80, if we have the strength. Yet their span is but trouble and sorrow, for they quickly pass, and we fly away.

He reflects on how 70 or 80 years fly past. And that gets him thinking about God. Even a long life can feel incredibly short. But if it feels like that to us, what must it feel like to God?

And so the psalmist begins to reflect further, and he begins to think about the fact that God actually was there in the Jurassic era. In verse 2 he writes, Before the mountains were born, or before you brought forth the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting, you are God.

[ 6 : 13 ] And one of the amazing things I find when I see the historic photographs and etchings of Edinburgh that you see all around the place, such a history-conscious city this is, is just how radically everything changes.

It's really fun to see that, except for Solisby Crags. That is amazing. You see all these pictures, and the crags are identical. It doesn't matter whether it's a photograph from 1900 or an etching from 1700, the crags are there.

But God can remember when it was different. He was there when the volcano was heaving and the plates were shifting. God was there when the mountains were born, and he's been there ever since. God has been there ever since, watching the world grow up. And to him, it does feel like yesterday. In verse 4, the psalmist says, For a thousand years in your sight are like a day that has just gone by, or like a watch in the night.

It's a very big God. But how big is your God? Is your God eternal? Or is he more or less your own age? The psalmist marvels at God's eternity.

[ 7 : 36 ] But then his mind turns to God's holiness. Now I think this is something we forget even more quickly than God's eternity. We forget even what the word means.

To say that God is holy is to say that he is utterly different. And especially how differently good he is.

So in the same way that a thousand years are like a day to God, a single sin to God is like a thousand to us. And the difference between God's definition of good and our definition of good is simply immense.

What seems like a trifle to us is not a trifle to him, because his goodness, his own goodness, is infinite. And so his response to sin is immensely bigger than ours.

And that's what's behind this rhetorical question that the psalmist poses in verse 11. He's saying, who knows how angry God gets?

[ 8 : 47 ] Well, nobody. Nobody does, because you would have as much luck measuring God's anger as you would calculating how old God is.

But more to the point, nobody knows how angry God gets because we never think about it. It's not particularly nice. In fact, our whole culture mocks the idea that God should be angry about sin. We think he should all just take it all in his stride. And frankly, this rubs off on us because we are immersed in our culture. But in verses seven to nine, we are reminded that God doesn't keep his people in the dark.

I can't see where we're up to. Is that the one? I think it is. He doesn't keep his people in the dark. And he reveals his anger to his people.

And this is the experience of God's people that the psalmist is recounting. He says, We are consumed by your anger and terrified by your indignation.

[ 9 : 52 ] You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your presence. All our days pass away under your wrath.

See, God doesn't allow his people to labor under the delusion that he just doesn't care. He will reveal his anger from time to time in judgment. Now, it's hard to tell exactly what period of Israel's history is on view here.

But it's highly likely, and I think there are a number of things that indicate in this psalm, that the exile is on view. But ultimately, it doesn't really matter. The point is that through this experience of judgment, God's people had once again come to see how big God is.

But how about you? How big is your picture of God? Is your God holy? Or is he not much different to any of us?

Seeing God's holiness is incredibly important because God's holiness is a kind of gateway to seeing a bunch of other things about God and perhaps the most important aspect of who God is for us.

[11:06] In seeing God's holiness, the psalmist comes to see this important, this crucial aspect of who God is. Seeing God's holiness reveals to the psalmist just how big God's love actually is.

And this is where everything clicks for him. It's like a thin ray of light penetrating this darkened cell of his heart and mind, indeed the whole nation's heart and mind.

So how do you know how much someone loves you? Well, I'd like to suggest it's not at birthdays or anniversaries. I'm not alluding to people who forget birthday presents or anniversary presents.

I'm just suggesting it's not revealed in how much someone might be willing to spend on you. You know how much someone loves you when you see how much they are willing to endure. Now last week there was a terrible accident in our household.

You're not supposed to use your children as sermon illustrations, but here goes. A very special cup was accidentally broken last week. My wife Kate, as many of you might know, is an English literature fan. She's very pleased when we got to visit Jane Austen's home.

[12:15] And there was a cup celebrating the 200th anniversary of the novel Emma. And this cup was enjoyed every day at breakfast and last week until the terrible accident.

But when a child knocks said cup off the bench, said child was devastated. And said child soon becomes aware of just how much their mum loves them.

Because it soon becomes apparent that this is bigger than however much love was invested in a cup. This is a very trivial example, but the dynamic is basically the same.

It's a trivial example for many reasons. For a start, it's not a sin to break a cup, especially by accident. But when we sin against God, that is no accident.

When we sin, we turn our backs on Him. And you really come to know that somebody loves you when they continue to love you when you turn your back on them. And this is how the psalmist comes to know just how big God's love is.

[13:20] If God is so angry, yet He still loves me, how great is that love? It's even bigger than what I've done against Him.

That is the key insight of the psalm. Now how big is your picture of God's love? Is it as big as this? The psalmist sees that it is.

And he reaches out with a thin sliver of faith. He hopes that there might be morning after the dark, dark night.

He hopes that there might be morning because God's love is so big. And then he calls out in verse 14, satisfy us in the morning with your unfailing love.

He calls out, love me. And we see how the psalmist wants God to love His people in the bookends of the psalm. Verses 1 and verses 17, the very first and the very last sentences.

[14:26] He wants God to shelter him. Look at verse 1. Lord, you have been our dwelling place throughout all generations.

A dwelling place. It's a lovely image, isn't it? It's an image of shelter and safety. This is how God loves His people.

He shelters them. Throughout all generations, God has kept the rain off His people. He has kept out the wind. Like a secure house, He's kept them safe.

Like a home, He has been a place of chairs, warm fires and meals. It's a beautiful image. God has been their dwelling place.

The thing is, God's people got sick of home sweet home. They went off and took shelter in other places. God was no longer their dwelling place. They sought shelter, security, and satisfaction in other places.

[15:29] And as a result, God left them. And this was His judgment upon them. I think one of the most devastating chapters of the Old Testament is not all the terrifically brutal and gruesome chapters.

It's Ezekiel chapter 10, which is a vivid depiction of God moving out of the temple and leaving His people to the invading armies of Babylon. In the grand scheme of things, this is a devastating chapter in the story of Israel.

But now the psalmist prays that God would show them His love once again. He wants God to be their dwelling place once more. And so he prays in verse 17, the other bookend of the psalm, establish the work of our hands for us.

This prayer alludes, I think, to the rebuilding of the temple. When the people of Jerusalem went out of exile, the Babylonians burnt down the temple. And it was plain to God's people that this happened because God had, in fact, left His dwelling place.

The city could be razed. The temple could be burnt down because God was no longer there to stop that. And this was His judgment on them. Just as they had left Him, He eventually would leave them.

[16:50] But when God returned them from exile, God's people would set about refurbishing the temple in the great hope that He would return once more and dwell among them.

And this is where the psalmist's prayer comes in. The psalmist asks God that He would bless the work of their hands. It's not just that the nails are going straight. It's bless this rebuilding of your dwelling place.

We cannot dwell in you if you do not dwell among us. See, it's not a prayer for carpentry. It's a prayer that God would indeed once more live among them.

Live among your people once again so your people may live in you. And this is the burden of the psalm. And so the psalmist repeats himself. Yes, establish the work of our hands.

God has been their dwelling place throughout all generations. He wants it to be like that again. But the point is that the psalmist only got to this point after he regained a much bigger picture of God.

[18:01] He only got to this point of wanting to dwell in God after he saw once again just how big God is. And so that is really the center of this psalm.

How big is your picture of God? Can you see how big He is? Or is He more like a grandpa in your pocket? In the course of Israel's long and sorry history, God revealed Himself again and again to His people, reminding them of His eternity.

Of His holiness and of His love. But nowhere did He do this more clearly than in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. At the cross, God showed His immense love by taking upon Himself the sin of His people.

At the cross, God revealed the full extent of His holiness, pouring out His righteous judgment, even on His Son. And in the resurrection, God demonstrated His eternity, swallowing up death in the power of His immortality.

And God revealed Himself in this way to summon not just His people Israel, but indeed the whole world to do exactly what the psalmist does in his prayer. God wants us to make Him our dwelling place, to make Him our shelter.

[19:28] So is that what God is for you? Is He your shelter? We all take shelter somewhere. If our family's pretty nice, that might be our shelter.

If work is pretty nice, that might be our shelter. Our shelter is whatever makes the world a safe place. We shelter in success wherever we can find it.

In people, wherever we can find them. In food, in comfort, in wealth. But none of these can possibly shelter us from God's holiness. And all of these things come from God anyway.

And that's why God calls us to take shelter in Him. But we constantly take leave of our shelter. I find myself constantly seeking shelter in other things or other people.

And this is a mistake. Don't people, food, wealth, all of these, doesn't all of that come from God anyway? We do this.

[20:33] We make this mistake because we can no longer see that He is the better shelter. Indeed, the only shelter.

That modern Irish psalmist, Van Morrison, captures the experience of God's wayward people in one of his songs when he sings, When will I ever learn to live in God?

When will I ever learn? It's a great paraphrase of Psalm 90, what's going on here. When will I ever learn? Well, the answer is very simple. When I see how big God actually is.

And that's why we must constantly return to the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Only there will we see what will return us to our true shelter.

And only there will we see what it is that we truly need sheltering from. So maybe this psalm finds you this morning sheltering elsewhere.

[ 21 : 36 ] Perhaps God has been your shelter for some time. Perhaps you've entrusted yourself to Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins and received His promise of eternal life for the concerns of each day.

I take it this is a church and so many of us, if not most of us, that's true. Yet you seek your shelter elsewhere.

On a day-to-day basis, for the concerns of each day, to all intents and purposes, you're seeking your shelter in those lesser things, those things that ultimately come from God.

If that's you this morning, the psalm simply calls you to understand why you are so wet and cold. It's funny, only in Scotland could it rain inside.

Where I spend most of my days at New College, unbelievably it rains inside. But that is the image of a shelter that doesn't work, isn't it? So understand why you are so wet and cold.

[ 22 : 38 ] Why your roof leaks. Or in Joe Cocker, perhaps not a modern psalmist, when the rain comes through the floorboards. I've never quite understood that line. But it's indicative of a shelter that doesn't work.

If the psalm finds you this morning sheltering other things, say what the psalmist says. Be my shelter once again.

But maybe the psalm finds you this morning in a situation not too dissimilar to that of the psalmist himself or the people that he's speaking on behalf of.

Perhaps for some time God has been your shelter, but you've wandered far from him. Perhaps it's a bit like in one of the sermons I heard a few years ago when the preacher said, I don't know what you get up to during the week.

That's a great line. This is really true. I don't know what you get up to each week. In fact, it's possible that the real state of your life is quite hidden, not just from me, but from other people, maybe even yourself.

[ 23 : 42 ] That it is not hidden from God. If you have wandered to the far country, God calls you this morning to return to him. Make these psalmists your own words.

Speak to your heavenly Father. You've been my dwelling place. Be my dwelling place again. Turn to him in repentance and let him be your shelter once again.

But it's also possible that this whole psalm is actually quite foreign to you. You might never have been at home with God. You might not know what it is to take shelter in God.

You might have only ever been looking in on the chairs, fires and warm meals, even if you walk through the doors of this church on a regular basis.

If that's you this morning, God is telling you in this psalm that you do not need to know these...

Sorry, he is telling you that you do not know these things because you have never seen him.

[ 24 : 42 ] That is what he is saying in this psalm. If you do not know these things, it's because you do not see him and you have never seen him. And so he calls us to look again to where he has shown himself most clearly.

He is calling you to see Christ crucified and the empty tomb where he revealed his holiness, love and eternity nowhere more clearly. And he did all this to be your shelter, to protect you from his awesome holiness, to give you the forgiveness of sins and eternal life and to be ever so much more than that, to be your shelter.

And if that's you this morning, make the psalmist's words your own. Speak to your heavenly Father and say, you have never been my dwelling place. Be my dwelling place from now and indeed forever.

As we reflect on this psalm now, let us pray together. Loving Father, you have indeed been the dwelling place of your people throughout all generations.

From everlasting to everlasting, you are God. Give us a fresher heart of wisdom this morning. Let us once again see the demonstration of your holiness, love and eternal life in the death and resurrection of your son Jesus.

[ 26 : 04 ] And in doing this, Lord, we pray, draw us to yourself that we may dwell in you and you in us. For Jesus' sake we pray.

Amen.