

Look Back to Look Forward

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Preacher: Robin Silson

[0 : 0 0] Amen. So one of the big ideas that comes out of this psalm, and a lot of psalms actually, is the idea of looking back at what's gone before, looking back at what's gone before, in order to look forward at what lies ahead, looking back at what's gone before, in order to look forward at what lies ahead.

Now that phrase there, it might seem a bit abstract at first. So I wanna explain a little bit about what I mean.

Everyone, we love to reminisce, don't we, about past life events, having that sense of nostalgia. It's where we get the stories, if you like, of our lives, isn't it?

There's those key moments where we think, it just seems like, oh, it seems like that only happened yesterday, and you think to yourself, where's the time gone?

Where's the time gone? Perhaps it's graduating from university, getting married, having children. And it's not just specific times either, we also have some memories of particular places, sporting events, or nights out, or particular holidays.

[1 : 1 6] And when we look back and think about those moments, they do bring, as we discuss them, or chat about them, as we chat with family or friends, we reminisce, they bring a smile on our face, doesn't it?

As we have that sense of nostalgia, of reminiscing. But the strange thing is, when we do that, is that there is another emotion that seems to crop up along the sort of the happiness of looking back of it.

There is, with that happiness, there is almost sometimes a strange sort of sadness, because that moment, it's past, it's gone, and it won't be repeated.

Parents with grown-up kids, you'll know this, you look back at old photos and think, oh, you remember when they were so away, you look at them now, leaving home, having families themselves.

And if we think it's just sort of the older we get, of course we've got more times where we can look back, but it's not just parents, my own children, they're only, the eldest one is five, we've just moved from Glasgow, and because there were so many happy times there, they miss it, they love to remember it, but they sort of miss their next-door neighbors, and there's a strange sadness that that period of life is over.

[2 : 3 8] It's a funny experience, how a joyful time in the past can produce that in us as we look back, both happiness and sadness at the same time.

Those were the days we say, those were the days. This Psalm is not like that, this Psalm is not like that, it's about doing the opposite, it's about not looking back, wishing those old days, the glory days we might call them, not pining for them or attempting to recreate them perhaps, but looking at what God has done and celebrating it with joy.

And more than that, I think, not just the things in our individual experience, but looking back at what God has done in history, how he's acted decisively, and what that means for our present and for our future, how what I said from the start, how looking back at what's gone before enables us to look with faith at the future ahead, because what God has done, his works we might call them, they demonstrate who he is, his character, what he's like and what that means for the future we look forward to.

And as we do that, this Psalm, it pushes us to respond, it pushes us to respond. But before we jump into that, I think it is worth noting the title or the context given to the Psalm.

You might just look with me, or it might come up on the screen, it says, it says, a Psalm, a song for the Sabbath. A song for the Sabbath. Now, as you'll know, we're New Testament believers and we don't meet on the Sabbath, which in the Jewish custom you'll know, it's a Saturday, we meet on a Sunday.

[4 : 28] The reason we do that is because it's the first day of the week, that's in light of the resurrection, which happens as you remember, the women, it says, they went on the first day of the week.

That's why we meet on a Sunday. Nevertheless, there is continuity from the principle of the Sabbath to how we approach the Lord's day. The day where we meet together with God's people, it's a day of rest to worship the living God.

Remember the Sabbath, says the Lord Tomorrow's. Remember the day of rest, it's a command, but it has continuity in our minds because we live in light of the resurrection.

It's good for us to have this day where we meet together and worship the Lord together. And as Christians, as we meet together, because of the resurrection, it actually elevates the idea of Sabbath rest.

It reminds us that the rest that we all long for is not actually a one day a week. The rest we long for is eternal Sabbath rest, forever rest.

[5 : 36] Eternal rest which has been bought for us, won for us at the cross and secured through Jesus rising from the dead. It's the victory that enables us to enjoy the fullness of rest, the fullness of Sabbath in the very presence of God.

And so it's entirely right that when we meet together, we remind ourselves of that. This Psalm, this song is named specifically as to be sung on the Sabbath, the day of rest that God has given.

And I think by having that title, I think what God is saying is this song, this Psalm, it typifies the type of song I want you to sing when you meet together.

What's contained within it should be the fuel of our praise. My real hope for us as we go through this is that we'll have an understanding of what the Lord desires that we sing to Him, of what things should bring us joy in Him, of how on the Lord's day we look back and sing about what's come before in order to look forward with faith and sing about the future that lies ahead.

And so the first thing I want us to see is that the Psalm is characterized by joy, by joy. When I say joy, I don't necessarily mean ecstatic jumping around, I mean an emotive response.

[7 : 12] And it's an emotive response that's founded on something real, something concrete. It's not just a fluffy, nice feeling because it has solid foundations to it.

Even in the first sort of few verses, we see joyful responses. Verse one, we see it's good to give thanks to the Lord, to sing praise to your name.

Verse two, to declare your steadfast love. And then verse three is about doing it all to music. These are the responses to something real, to something concrete.

And in verse four, such an important verse, what we get is the reasons behind doing all that. What's the reason behind giving thanks? The reason behind singing, declaring truth and making music.

Verse four, this is the reason. For you, O Lord, have made me glad. How? By your work.

[8 : 16] At the work of your hands, I sing for joy. Meditating and thinking on the Lord's works.

What He's done, what's gone before. And the response to the memory of the Lord's work is exactly what He says. Thankfulness, singing, making music, declaring truth about the living God.

And I think there's a few things that are really striking going on in these opening verses. There's a few, really striking. And the first thing I want to draw our attention to is the phrase that starts the Psalm actually.

It is good. It is good. I think that reminds us that what we're doing here this morning, gathering together, we're full of thanks, we've said prayers of thanks, we're full of praise, we've sung to the living God, we're declaring truth and we're singing.

That's what we're doing. We're doing the things that it tells us to do in this Psalm. God's word says that what we're doing here is good. It is good. It is good that we meet together.

[9 : 29] This is the best thing that you could be doing with your Sunday morning, right now. It is good that you're here. And I wonder if we should remind ourselves of that.

Tell yourself, it's good that I'm here. Tell one another, maybe the person next to you, after the service, it's good that you're here.

Because what we do when we are here is good. The second thing I want to draw our attention to is the reason it's good.

The reason it's good. Any joy or happiness that we experience, I suppose, in life, it is always centered on something.

We're not just sort of happy for no reason. I was talking to a friend just the other week who went along to the Scotland-Denmark game and he was saying there's 50,000 people singing about their national team, not just because they felt like it, but it was based on the fact that they were tuning up and had a playoff place secured.

[10 : 41] It's worth celebrating. And if football is worth celebrating, and don't get me wrong, I love celebrating football too, but if it is, we have more reasons.

The reason that we have to celebrate, the reason it's so good is because the center of our attention, our focus is the Lord, his character and what he's done, his works, it says in this Psalm, his goodness, his steadfast love, his faithfulness, the wonderful gospel of a Savior who is Christ the Lord, making a way for us to have real relationship with him, understanding what truth is, what grace is.

Because the reason we can do that is because he's put his Holy Spirit in our hearts, making you and I new creations in him, a victory that secures our redemption.

These are the things that we remind ourselves of that are worth celebrating. It is good that we're here this morning to celebrate the works of the Lord.

And so, when we look back at our lives, we don't need to reminisce by pining for the good old days, but we give thanks for them. We rejoice in what he's done for us individually, and what he's done in history for his people.

[12 : 13] Now, you might see perhaps that these first few verses that we've looked at, they've kind of been a more general outlook regarding our response to the Lord's works.

And the Lord's works sort of encompasses quite a lot of things. But the rest of the Psalm, there is a focusing on particular aspects of God's works that the Psalmist, he wants to hone in on and draw our attention even further on.

And it sort of comes in two halves, so we're gonna look at them separately. But the first aspect, you might say, it comes in verse eight, verse eight, but you, O Lord, are on high forever.

You, O Lord, are on high forever. The Lord is on his throne, on high, and that's not a temporary arrangement. It's not like one day there's gonna be somebody else, there he's there forever, it's an eternal reality.

The Lord always has been and will always be on high on his throne forever. A good question that we might be thinking at this point is why is it out of all the things that he hone in on too?

[13 : 31] Well, why is it that the Psalmist wants to hone in on that? What is it about the Lord being on high that's important? And for my money, I think there's, from the verses that surround verse eight, I think the Psalmist, he's well aware and we'll be well aware of this, that although, for many of us, we know that to be true up here, we know that to be true.

If anything of the last few years has taught us, it doesn't always feel or look that way, does it? We know that God's in charge, we know that. We could tell somebody else that, that he's on the throne, but it doesn't always feel like that.

The contrast that surrounds this verse eight's in the middle and the contrast that surrounds this about the Lord on high is the temporary earthly success of his enemies, verse seven, it says the wicked sprouts like grass and it talks about evildoers flourishing.

And if we just saw verse seven, we think, yeah, actually, that seems to fit with the world that I live in. It seems at times that that can be more real.

Evil somehow seems to have the upper hand. Do you watch the news? Even in the last couple of weeks, we've had shootings, terrorist attacks, COVID's ongoing, we've got corruption in companies, governments, maybe even in the neighbors we live in.

[15 : 14] We see family fumes and the like. It can appear to us that these are the things that are growing and flourishing. And the scientist recognizes that.

Perhaps if it's not those bigger things, our thoughts turn to individuals who might seem to escape justice.

You think of people like Jimmy Savile, no retribution. When that came to light, there was an outpouring of rage because he died without a trial.

He lived a life of luxury whilst carrying out atrocities. He flourished in his life. And we think, where's the justice?

Maybe our attention turns to world leaders in countries that allow our brothers and sisters in Christ to be persecuted whilst they live in palaces behind high security walls and seemingly happy.

[16 : 25] And the question comes, where is the justice? The difference.

And I know where those things, I know where at all want to be flippant about any of that. Their suffering is horrendous and we should weep with them.

What this Psalm teaches us is that that position will be reversed. Those who finish last will be first and the first last.

The Lord is on high. He's on high for how long? Forever. Verse seven, they're talking about his enemies.

They're doomed to destruction. Verse nine, they shall perish, they shall be scattered. We long for injustices to cease, we long for that. Praise God he's on high forever.

[17 : 34] So we don't despair. But the Psalmist's calling us to give thanks for the fact that this is true. To sing, to declare, to make music because there will be a day when the wrongs will be made right, when the reign of our King will come.

And so we can rejoice now in anticipation of that becoming a reality that we know, that we see, that we live in.

So we've honed in on the Lord on high. And so now we come to the second aspect that the Psalmist wants us to zoom in on.

And we saw a contrast in the one before between the enemies and the Lord on high. And we get a second contrast here. The contrast here is a contrast between the wicked and the righteous, both flourish.

We've seen that, but in totally different ways. Whereas the enemies of God flourish in an earthly sense, the righteous flourish spiritually, the righteous flourish spiritually.

[18 : 40] And you might notice here, as we were reading through it, you might have noticed some of the language. It sort of picks up some of the language that we looked at quite a while back at the beginning of this series in Psalm one.

Remember Psalm one verse three, it says, he talking about the righteous, it says, he is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in season. And its leaf does not wither.

In all that he does, he prospers. And we get similar sort of metaphors in the Psalm that we're looking at today. Metaphor of God's people as the righteous as trees planted in God's house.

Now, of course, God's house in the Old Testament, that's the temple. And of course, in the temple, there was no physical trees. But what the Psalmist is doing, is using picture language, demonstrating how God's people grow and flourish in him.

And there's three contrasts, big contrasts, that I want us to connect with this plant metaphor. The first one is the type of plant.

[19 : 45] If you look with me, it says, it says the enemies, they're likened to grass. If you remember what, I think it's James says, James, grass here today, gone tomorrow, grass withers, but the righteous, like a palm tree, a cedar in Lebanon.

Just to give you a bit of an idea about those types of trees, palm trees, cedars. They actually grow to about 100 feet tall. And their diameter is at the base.

They're six feet in diameter, they're massive. It's not just any tree, but he's chosen particular trees that are the strongest. They're the most stable.

So do you see what God is saying? That the righteous, they have stability in the Lord. They have roots that go down in him and they prosper.

That's the first thing. The second difference is how the plant begins. Notice there's a word that's not with the wicked. It talks about them being planted.

[20 : 47] The righteous are planted, they're cared for by the Lord, that doesn't happen with the wicked. And I remember the other year, I was walking in the parks in Glasgow with Heidi, Maya Eldis girl, and we found a conker and I showed her, she had the conker in her hand and we're picking different conkers up.

And I showed her the tree that it came from and explained to her that if you planted a conker in the ground, it would grow into the tree that was next to us, just like this tree.

And you should have seen the look that she gave me. She took hold of the conker, she looked at it, and she looked at the tree, looked at the conker again.

She looked at me, pulled her, screwed up her face and went, silly dad. And you can almost see her point, can't you?

It is unbelievable. It is amazing that you put a conker in the ground, and not get me wrong, it takes years, but eventually it would grow to be a huge tree.

[22 : 02] Now this is probably an illustration you weren't expecting, but I think people are a little bit like conkers. You know what happens out of the ground a conker?

It's picked up by a child, put on the end of a string and repeatedly beaten against another one. But if you're planted in the ground, it's a different ball game.

If you get planted by the Lord, you just watch. Now you don't become a tree overnight, but watered, nurtured, perfect, perfect, by fixating our mind on Him, on the truth of who He is.

It's a lifetime till you're fully grown. It's full of winters and summers, good times and bad, but Jesus transforms, grows us in Him.

That little sapling believer, ensuring he gets the right light and water kept at the right temperature. He plans ensuring that the flourishing is not like the wicked in the world, but in the courts of the living God.

[23 : 12] In the knowledge of His love, being soaked in His Word. And the last difference is the righteous bear fruit.

We don't see that with the wicked, but the righteous bear fruit, verse 14, they bear fruit still in old age, they're ever full of sap and green. These plants bear fruit, you think of the palm tree, bearing delicious dates, hanging low to be picked off and enjoyed.

And not just now, but they continue to do so, still producing in old age. I think that last point is so counter-cultural in today's world, in the way that the world thinks, the productivity as you get older goes down.

And I suppose physically, we can't do as much, but worship is a lifelong endeavor. It's not just for when you're young, no far from it.

Those that they're spiritual peak are those who've walked with the Lord the longest, spiritually flesh, bursting with spiritual life and wisdom and godliness, never too old to be used by the Lord, the more spiritually fit there is, whose roots have grown the deepest and whose fruit is the most mature. These are the Lord's works.

[24 : 35] This is what the Lord's has done. There's a lot of things that we can sing about. The Lord is on high and justice will come, but also the Lord plants the righteous.

The Lord plants the righteous. But you know what's really fascinating about this? What's really fascinating is that it's the enemies of God, the ones that deserve to perish, to be scattered.

It's among them that they're the ones that the Lord ends up planting. That's us. We were at one time hostile to God.

Our God was our belly as we navel gaze, looking at ourselves, living to satisfy our own desire. It is a miracle that we're not still in that position.

It is an absolute miracle that we're in the courts of God as the righteous, that we now declare, verse 15, that the Lord is upright, that he's our rock, that we know and recognize that there's no righteousness in him. That is a miracle.

[25 : 46] That is a work of God worth singing about, worth declaring, worth giving thanks for.

And so as we come in for landing, let's remember that it is good to be here. There is nothing better than you could be doing right now, meeting with God's people.

Let's remember his works, let's meditate in them. Joy in the Lord is not something that comes out of nowhere, but it requires us to fixate our minds and our attention on the good news of the gospel, on the beauty of Jesus, that he punishes sin, that Jesus has taken our punishment and has planted us in him, like palm trees bearing fruit into old age.

We look back, we reminisce at what God has done, and it gives us faith for a glorious future. It's worth singing about. And do you know, we will never stop singing about the Lord's works.

When we meet together and praise God for his works, like this, where he'd actually just joining in with the chorus of heaven. Just look with me, should come on the screen, Revelation 15, this is the people of God singing praise in heaven. This is what they sing.

[27 : 04] And they sing the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb. And they say, great and amazing are your deeds, O Lord God the Almighty.

Just and true are your ways, O King of the nations. Who will not fear, O Lord, and glorify your name? For you alone are holy. All nations will come and worship you. For your righteous acts have been revealed.

We will never get tired of seeing praise about what the Lord has done. When our Sabbath climax is with the eternal rest that lasts forever, we will be a singing people, a praising people that sing and declare his amazing works and his wondrous deeds.

When we look back, it gives us confidence that this is the future we look forward to, that the Sabbath points us to. Let's pray together.

Almighty God, we praise you and we thank you for your words to us this morning. And we praise you for your wondrous works, your amazing deeds.

[28 : 18] We thank you for all that you've done in our lives. We thank you that you've taken us and planted us in Christ and that we grow in Him. We thank you that we have roots in you and that we bear fruit.

We thank you that you're just. We thank you that you're unhigh and you'll be unhigh forever. And we thank you that all injustice is will cease and that your reign will last forever.

We look forward to that day. As we look back, give us confidence, give us hope, reassurance, encouragement to live with faith in the future that you have prepared for us.

We ask for this in Jesus' name. Amen.