

Horsley Evangelical Church (www.horsleyec.org.uk)

Minister Rev Ken McIntosh 27th September 2020

Psalm 104 Harvest Thanksgiving

Several years ago we looked at this glorious Psalm at harvest time, but I want to look at it afresh today. It's one we often read during our thanksgiving service, especially the wonderful central verses, and it's a song which meditates on the goodness of God and the greatness of God as he rules the world and provides for his creatures in all sorts of ways.

It's linked with Psalm 103 in that both Psalms begin and end with the same words - "Praise the Lord, O my soul". In Psalm 103 the Psalmist is remembering *the love of God towards his people in salvation*. "Praise the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits, who forgives all your sins" etc. But in our Psalm, the writer is remembering *the love of God in managing the world he has made*. He tells us of God's creation and how he rules over creation and cares for it.

And I think the verse which help us interpret the Psalm is this one - "Praise the Lord, O my soul". Here the psalmist (and we are not told who it is in Psalm 104 – in Psalm 103 it's David), but the psalmist *stirs himself up* to praise the Lord as the author of salvation and the king of creation. He knows he is prone to forget all the Lord's benefits and to wander in his affection. So he rouses himself to remember and worship the God who is worthy of all our praise.

And as we study the Psalm, this is the phrase we need to keep coming back to. "Praise the Lord, O my soul". For the writer is giving himself reasons why he should praise the Lord from the depth of his being. And this is something we all need, in a society that seems to side-line God more and more.

Well, let's look at the Psalm in six sections. Verses 1-4 speak of **God's greatness and splendour**. **Read verses 1-4**. The Psalmist knows how men measure their own greatness and splendour - by their clothes and houses, their means of transport and their servants. And then they tend to compare what they have with their neighbour.

But the Psalmist is rousing himself to think of God's greatness and splendour. And so he thinks of God's 'clothes', his 'house', 'chariot' and 'servants'. First the Lord's clothes. *The Lord wraps himself in light as with a garment*. Of course we are dealing with *poetry* throughout the Psalm and so we must guard against too literalistic an interpretation of what we read. But if men like to wear clothes that impress and even dazzle, then the Lord clothes himself in light. The Lord created light at the beginning. He *is* light, in that he is altogether good, pure and holy. And he lives in unapproachable light. The appearance of the Lord is too awesome, too dazzling and bright for sinful men to bear. And as for his 'house', well, the universe in all its beauty, vastness and mystery is his 'house' - actually his 'tent' which implies it is not permanent. Men may admire their ceilings or measure the heights of their houses and compare it with others. But God's 'ceiling' is above the clouds. He sits enthroned above the clouds.

Again, men who own chariots compare their chariots with their neighbour's. But the Lord's 'chariots' are the clouds which are blown across the sky by the wind. And then we come to God's messengers or servants. Hebrews quotes verse 4 and explains it refers to angels. **Read Hebrews 1:7**. And these angels are awesome creatures capable of great works and great destruction if the Lord so commands. And they are pictured as carrying out the will of God with speed and accuracy.

So the Lord is very active in his world. Any modern idea that God has wound up the universe like a clock and stands back to see what unfolds is very wrong. God is entirely 'hands on'. And the myriad of his commands are carried out swiftly by awesome creatures who are his willing servants. When did

we last think about the Lord's greatness and splendour? The Psalmist is stirring up his soul, and ours, to think about this.

Then verses 5-9 speak about **the stability of the earth**. Here is something else in God's management of the earth that the Psalmist uses to stir his soul to praise. **Read verses 5-9**. The Lord has graciously given to the earth a stability that enables life to happen. First he talks about the earth's foundations which can never be moved. We understand the importance of a building's foundations. It doesn't matter how beautiful or large the building is, if it's *foundations* are not firm, there are big problems and dangers for those who live in the building.

But the earth's foundations are secure because the Lord has made them so. And they are amazing 'foundations' aren't they because the earth is apparently suspended in mid-air! The earth is not set on a large rock. Nor is it held in place by a giant frame. It is fixed in mid-air. Yet it is secure. The Physicist may talk about gravitational forces keeping the earth in its 'position'. But that's only their way of describing mathematically something they don't really understand. But what does the Bible say? **Read Psalm 93:1**. Then our Psalmist describes poetically what Genesis describes in prose - how the earth was originally covered with water but then how during the days of creation the Lord separated the waters and formed the dry land and the seas. But the point is that God has commanded the waters of the sea not to cross the boundaries he has set. And again because of that 'stability', life continues on planet earth.

We tend to take this stability for granted. But what if the 'foundations' of the earth were unsafe, and the planet moved from its 'fixed' position (I know the whole earth is moving and spinning all the time – but you know what I mean). Life on earth would be obliterated. And only God prevents that from happening. And what if the seas crossed the boundaries God set for them. What if one day the seas crossed the boundary God set around the British Isles so that we were suddenly submerged with seawater. Only God prevents that from happening.

When was the last time we thanked God for the stability he has given to the earth. We are to care for planet earth; it's part of our stewardship of the planet. But we must not let people who have no fear of God scare or panic us about the instability of the earth. The earth is in God's hands. He has made it secure. And the Psalmist uses this to stir his heart to praise the Lord.

Then in verses 10-18 the Psalmist talks about **the sustaining of the earth**. And this is particularly appropriate for us at harvest thanksgiving. Verses 10-13 and then 16-18 speak about the Lord watering the earth. **Read verses 10-13, 16-18**. I don't know if you enjoy watering your garden in the summer months. I confess I find it a chore, and my wife kindly does the watering usually. But these verses describe in poetry form the Lord's delight in watering the earth. He waters the mountains from his upper chambers and these waters flow down the hills to satisfy both plants and animals.

We may be thankful that the beasts of the field have water to drink (11), for we use these animals. But I'm not sure if we ever think about the wild donkeys or the wild goats or the rock badgers. They are creatures out of sight and out of mind – as most of God's creatures are. But the Lord remembers them and gives them water every day. And as the trees and plants drink in God's water they grow and support all sorts of other lifeforms. The birds of the air for example nest in the branches of the trees. Of course, were it not for all the moisture, nothing would survive. But God makes sure the earth is watered. The waters which my at times threaten humanity are actually made to benefit the inhabitants of the earth.

But the focus of this section is found in verses 14, 15. **Read verses 14, 15**. Again it is implied that God delights in doing this. Having watered the earth the Lord then makes things grow. God is a keen gardener. And the grass feeds the cattle which gives man meat to eat, milk to drink and leather and wool to use etc. Then plants grow giving man vegetables and fruit and cereals. And men and women who are made in the image of God are able to use these basic commodities to produce things that

enrich life. The wine gladdens our heart and is a gift from God. The oil make our face shine and is a gift from God. And the bread is such a pleasure to eat and sustains our heart.

God is good. He sustains the creation. He enables his creation to enjoy so many things. And we notice that these verses do not speak only of Israel enjoying these things, but all people. God's *common grace* is spoken of here.

When was the last time we thanked God for watering the earth, for watering the wild donkeys and the rock badgers, for giving habitat for the birds to make their nests? When did we last thank him for the streams that flow and the bird that sing? Do we thank him for our daily food and the rich variety of things he gives us to enjoy? Again the Psalmist is using these things to stir his heart to praise the Lord. He takes the time to think through some of the many things the Lord does to sustain the earth and his creation.

Then in verses 19-23 the Psalmist speaks about **the rhythms of life** which the Lord gives to us. In his providential care of the world, God give us certain cycles and patterns and seasons which make life easier and planning possible. It also adds to the feeling of stability that was mentioned earlier. **Read verses 19-23.** We now know that these patterns are established because the earth spins on its axis in relation to the sun. It also orbits around the sun just as the moon orbits the earth. But these movements give day and night and the seasons. And so life has patterns which, in a *good* way, make things predictable. And the creation uses these patterns. So there are animals such as the lion which are active at night. And then there are creatures such a humans who are more active during the day.

And all this is by God's design. The sun knows when to go down. The lion knows when to hunt its food from God. And man knows it's time to get up when the sun rises. God is a God of order. But again we can take these rhythms that God gives for granted. But what if the sun didn't rise tomorrow - or for the next 3 weeks? And what if the coming winter lasted for 7 years. And what if the earth should go just a fraction nearer to the sun in its orbit so that global temperatures rose by say 20 degrees? But these thing don't happen because God is good, and God is in control. And the Psalmist rouses himself not to take these things for granted but to praise the Lord for all his benefits and for his kindly management of the earth.

Then in verses 24-30 the Psalmist remembers **God's giving and taking of life**. And again he stirs himself up to praise. **Read verses 24-30.** When Paul speaks to the people of Athens he reminds them about the living God. "The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth...he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else...for in him we live and move and have our being." So the creation is never independent of its creator. All we have, even life itself, belongs to God and he gives it to us for a time.

The opening verses of this section remind us that everything belongs to God. The whole earth is full of *his* creatures. There are many we know so little about – those that live in the sea for example, creatures beyond number, but they are all his. And even creatures that men fear, such as the mythical sea creature Leviathan is known to God and is under his authority.

And all look to God for their food. All are satisfied by his hand. But the point of the section is found in verses 29, 30. If God should look away from his creature, if he should take away his life-giving spirit, then that creature will die and return to the dust. Yet when the Lord sends his Spirit, there is new life and the face of the earth is renewed.

We are all but a breath. The breath is given to us by God for a time and our lives are in his hands. Who would not then worship and praise him. And yet, how many chose to live their lives as if their lives belonged to *them*, or as if the NHS kept them alive. When did we last remember that God gives and takes life as he pleases? When did we last thank him for his gift of life?

The Psalm then ends with **concluding prayer**. **Read verses 31-35**. In his first prayer the Psalmist asks that the Lord would rejoice in his works and that God's glory (probably the glory seen in God's creation) would endure forever. In his second prayer the Psalmist prays that his meditation and praise would be pleasing in God's sight. But then in his third prayer the Psalmist prays that all sinners would be removed from the earth.

In each prayer he prays not for himself, for his own ease or enjoyment, but only for the Lord's honour and glory. And each prayer looks to the *future* and yearns for a time yet to come. To the time when sinners (that is to say people who have no intention of praising their creator and who live in rebellion against him) will be no more. To the time when God is able to fully rejoice in his creation. And to the time when redeemed men and women praise the Lord as he deserves.

In Psalm 104, the writer praises the Lord for his gracious and wise management of the earth. And yet for all its beauty and majesty, he knows the present creation is not as it should be and is temporary. God did not originally create lions to go out and hunt their prey at night. Death was never part of the original creation. And certainly God did not create man as sinners who reject him and shake their fist in his face. But then again a tent (mentioned in verse 2 to describe the God's universe) is not permanent. And so for all its beauty and wonder, the Psalmist knows the world as is now will not last. And his concluding prayers express this yearning for something even better.

And the New Testament expresses that same yearning. God's people are described there as groaning, longing for the redemption of our bodies. And even the creation itself, Paul famously tells us in Romans 8, groans because it has been subjected to frustration and bondage to decay because of human sin. Creation itself longing to be set free at the same time that the children of God are set free.

And so we too can stir up our hearts to praise the Lord as the Psalmist does throughout the Psalm. But we too understand his longing for something even better. And that yearning leads us to the Lord Jesus Christ. For he came to bring us the forgiveness of sin that Psalm 103 speaks about. Christ came to reconcile us to God and to establish the eternal kingdom of God. And his work on the cross will one day result in the creation itself being set free from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of God's children.

There is of course a tension here. We do thank and praise God for this present world and his wonderful management of it and delight in it. But we do so, knowing that God has made his children great promises regarding the future. The present earth is not as he first created it to be. But God sent this Son to redeem a fallen humanity and even to redeem this fallen creation. And one day this present creation will disappear, and a new heaven and earth will be established, the eternal home of righteousness. We thank God for harvest. But we also long for the time when death will be a thing of the past, when the lion will lie down with the lamb and when we ourselves shall be changed into the image of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.