

Let's Get Real

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 29 December 2024

Preacher: Ong Meng Chai

- [0 : 0 0] Now before we come to hear God's word, let's all bow in prayer and seek the Lord's help. Our dear God and Heavenly Father, as we come to you, we thank you again that we have your word with us this morning.
- We thank you that your word records for us the realities of life and death. We thank you that your word records for us real people and their life stories.
- In time and in real places. Our Father, as we come to you, we pray therefore that as we read your word year by year, day by day, we may be gripped by what you are doing in the lives of these people in their times.
- And that we might reflect upon how you are doing the same in our day. And so we pray this morning as we come together that as we hear your word, your spirit might impart upon us your grace and your mercy in order that we might understand your word and apply it for our lives.
- We come to you as ever, recognizing that we are but sheep that go astray easily, wanting always to follow our own way. Our God, please turn us around.
- [1 : 2 4] Help us to repent of our sinfulness and our foolishness. And grant that we may follow you, our great shepherd. And so we commend ourselves to you and ask that you will be with us.
- We thank you in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Now I think you will agree that it wasn't so long ago that the specter of death was staring at us daily in our news, and need I add, in our neighborhoods, among our friends and relatives.
- Just some years ago, we couldn't ignore death. Even if we tried, for COVID-19 hit us so hard here, just as it did in many other countries around the world.
- Like me, you would have lost friends because of it, family members, and so on. It was like a living nightmare for many of us, as death after death took its toll on all and sundry.
- Now that COVID-19 has come under control a bit, its memory seems like a distant past to us, doesn't it? And we all would wish, if we could, to forget what has happened.
- [2 : 4 4] What many don't realize is that death has been a reality you and I and our forebears have had to face up to, and future generations will have to face up to, whether they like it or not.
- In 2023 alone, last year, it is estimated that 61 million people in the world died. That is double the population of Malaysia, by the way.
- So COVID-19 or not, people have been dying daily, regularly, in-seasonally, and inevitably.
- What COVID-19 did was merely to accentuate, accelerate the number of deaths in 2020 and 2021. Making us conscious, therefore, of the reality of death.
- You know, a study on the website of Our World in Data estimated that 110 billion human beings have died since the very beginning of time.
- [3 : 5 2] And that makes up 94% of all the human beings that have ever existed until today. 94% of all human beings have died. You and I, today, who are alive, make up the remaining 6%.

96%. I am tempted, aren't you, huh, to remind the authors of that study that actually they need to revise those figures. I tell you why.

For even though this 6% who are still alive today, like you and me, we will one day have to join the 94%, whether we like it or not. Eventually, 100% of all human beings will die, barring, of course, two persons in human history.

Namely, Enoch and Elijah. But the rest of us will all die. But as I said, now that COVID-19 is not the threat it was anymore, the stark reality of death which hit us so hard during COVID-19 seems like a distant memory.

Indeed, I think many of us prefer not to think about death, especially if you're still young. Much of the propaganda we get in our mass media, in fact, concentrates upon immunizing us against death.

[5 : 10] That's the reason why we don't say so and so died anymore, do we? What do we say? He passed away. He passed on.

He's no longer with us. All right? More crudely, we say he kicked the bucket. He snuffed it. Oh, he's bitten the dust.

Oh, he has cashing in the chips. Oh, he conked out, very crudely. And just so it doesn't sound too irreligious, we even say, don't we, he has given up the ghost.

Now, these all slangy substitutes don't make death any less real. More than 160,000 people die every day in the world.

Of all sorts of causes. They will die whether they want to or not. That is a stark reality. Now, I've turned you to Psalm 90 because it counsels us to make time to consider the stark reality of life but also of death.

[6 : 20] I find that very comforting and very reassuring because when the crunch does come and it will come sooner or later for every one of us, now you want something that will help keep you having a true perspective of life and may I add death as well.

And Psalm 90 is a very good example of someone who has the right perspective of life and death. Now, the psalm can be easily divided into three parts. The central part, which we'll look at first, is verses 3 to 12.

And they deal with just the kind of real issues of life and death we need to face up to. And then there's the introduction in verses 1 and 2. And also the epilogue at the end in verses 13 to 17.

And the introduction and the epilogue would tell us how it is possible for us to face up to all these issues of life and death.

But let's begin with the central part, as I said, because that's what we are really interested in. And here the Sámis discusses an unfamiliar theme.

[7 : 32] One that you won't find in our mass media today, all right? It is the theme, actually, not of death, but of God's anger, God's wrath against sinful mankind.

Look at verse 7, will you? We are consumed by your. Who is the your there? God. We are consumed by your anger and terrified by your indignation.

Look at verse 9. All our days pass away under your wrath, God's wrath. Verse 11. Who knows the power of your anger, God's anger?

For your wrath is as great as the fear that is due you. I can't be clearer, can I? All that makes our lives so precarious and uncomfortable and uncertain is the result of God's anger against us.

And if you know your Bible, you know that that is what life is like outside of the Garden of Eden. Because of their sin of disobedience, the first man and woman were banished from the Garden of Eden.

- [8 : 44] And ever since then, things have been out of joint in our world. We not only are sinners, we live in a sinful and fallen world.
- And it is a fact that the psalmist highlights in this central part of Psalm 90. Here then, are the painful realities of life here on earth for every one of us.
- Number one. The psalmist paints for us the miserable end of life for each one of us. Verse 3. As a pastor, previously I've conducted quite a number of funerals over the years.
- And each time I've had to pronounce these awful words at the grave. We commit his or her body to the ground, earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust.
- In the days before we had crematoriums, we buried our dead. Now we cremate them. But whichever it is, one truth remains.
- [9 : 57] The end of all flesh is the grave. And it's very disconcerting, isn't it, to see someone we loved dearly reduced to a little pot of ashes.
- To see someone that we loved so much that we tried to lessen the pain by putting them in this pot of ashes, perhaps in a crematorium or a memorial garden.
- At the end, all our celebration of life is reduced to nothing but ashes. It is pathetic, to say the least.
- Not only is the end of life miserable, pathetic. The psalmist reminds us that severe limitations are placed upon our human time spans.
- In comparison with God's span, look at verse 4. For a thousand years in God's sight are like a day that has gone by like a watch in the night.
- [11 : 01] When you say a watch in the night, it doesn't mean your watches are pleased. A watch in the night was the shortest measurement of time known to the Jews. And according to the psalmist, what is our time to God?
- What is your time? What is my time to God? Miniscule, minute, for God is beyond time. He is eternal.
- From beginning to end, He is there. But you and I, we are not like that. We are limited by time. No matter how long we live, we never seem to have enough time for all that we want to do.
- Am I right? We moan, don't we, the lack of time. And how it is that time flies. Have you heard some older people telling you that?
- I used to wonder why older people always say that time seems to fly faster as they get older. And now that I am there, I understand. It seems like only yesterday, when I was a schoolboy.
- [12 : 09] Those of you who were at the seminar yesterday, you remember? I told you where I come from. Kuala Pilan. In Negri San Pilan. I still can remember the school.
- I still can remember exactly where I went to cycle around the cemeteries and so on. It's just like yesterday. But time flies. And we can't keep a grip on it.
- That's the painful reality of life on earth. Something else the psalmist says. And you find this in verses 5 to 6. Life is just too short.
- I'm not sure how many of you know the hymn, Oh God, I'll help in ages past. It's based on this psalm.
- Did you know that? While I agree with it as a whole, I fault the hymn on one ground. And it is found in the fifth verse of the hymn, which says this, Time is like an ever-rolling stream will bear us all away.

[13 : 14] Now, what does that suggest? It suggests a cozy picture of death, doesn't it? Of a dying person in a boat sailing gently along a stream. But you know, verse 5 of this psalm paints a rather different picture.

Doesn't it? Instead of an ever-rolling stream, there is the far more terrifying picture of a dam bursting and releasing floodwaters which sweep people away.

The psalmist goes on to say that we are like a dream, soon forgotten, or like grass which flourishes briefly, but is soon withered by the sun.

Think of the many young people who die each day. I had a cousin, right, who like so many young people, not in his time, they didn't do this, but he was unusual.

He actually kept fit. Way back in the 1990s, he attended the gym regularly. I still remember him when he was young. He was a scrawny, small thing.

[14 : 26] But some years later, when I saw him, my goodness, all the muscles. And he did this every day, according to the mother. He was trying to keep, not only his muscles strong, he was trying to keep death at bay.

And then all of a sudden, he collapsed one day in the house, and he died. He was only in his 30s. Course? Unknown.

He was gone just like that. No hint he was coming. Here today, gone the next. You know, throughout the ages, philosophers have bemoaned the brevity of life, the shortness of life.

Scientists have been trying, haven't they, to discover an elixir to prolong our life. Can I say this to them? It is guaranteed to fail. What they don't realize is this.

The Bible tells us in no uncertain terms, the painful truth, that all of these are due to the anger of God. That is what has caused the miserable end of life, our inability to get the grip of time, and the shortness and the brevity of life.

[15 : 52] The anger of God. In a word, as the psalmist so pointedly tells us in verses 7 to 9, death actually is not natural.

Can I put it that way? It was never meant to be like this in the first place, that our lives should come to an end, verse 9, like a sigh.

Death as such was never meant to be in our makeup as human beings originally. But because of man's sin, death was introduced into our world. So death is not natural.

Scientists and medical people would like us to believe that death is just a natural thing which will happen. Isn't that the case? I mean, it's part of the evolutionary theory, isn't it?

They say that sooner or later every living thing will come to die. But ironically, these very same scientists who claim death is natural try to prolong life.

[16 : 58] Why? Why don't accept that death is bound to happen and will happen no matter what happens? Why try to prolong life if you believe it's natural?

Some are foolish enough to think that perhaps one day we'll be able to keep death at bay and maybe even beat it. The fact of the matter is that deep down inside all of us, most of us know that death is not natural.

We wish and long that it would not happen. We wish that we will never have to see our loved ones die. We know it is not natural.

As the psalmist affirms in verses 7 to 8, death is the result of God's judgment upon sinful mankind. So let us not fool ourselves as we come into the new year.

We cannot escape death. It will come to you and me sooner or later. COVID-19 or not. If there's one thing that's absolutely certain, this side of heaven, it is that everyone who has ever been born will have to die because it is a judgment of God upon our sin.

[18 : 18] But suppose for a moment, suppose for a moment, you should live up to three score and ten years mentioned in verse 10. Three score and ten years, by the way, is 70 years.

Latest statistics in Malaysia suggest that both men and women in Malaysia can expect to live up to 70 and beyond. I know of a number of friends whose mothers are now in their 90s, by the way.

While living in the UK in the late 1990s, my wife and I knew someone in our church who lived up to the grand old age of 103. When she was 100 years old and we celebrated her birthday in a hotel, there was a birthday card from Queen Elizabeth II.

I don't know if you all know, but there is a tradition in the UK that if you live up to 100 years old, the royal family will send you a birthday card. But birthday card or not, she soon became very, very ill, frail, and eventually she ended up in a home, a care home.

And while many of us admire her for living up to a ripe old age, well, there is a downside, isn't it, to a ripe old age. The psalmist puts it like this in verse 10, the length of our days is 70 years or 80 if we have the strength.

[19 : 48] Yet, that's a big yet, yet their span is but trouble and sorrow. See that? That's the reality. Illnesses, diseases, various other ailments will dock our lives increasingly as we get older.

The loss of one's hearing, the loss of one's sight, the loss of one's vigor and energy, the loss of one's memory, that's very scary, isn't it?

Parkinson's, dementia, Alzheimer's, they're all on the rise. Some of us have had the painful experience of having to care for parents who have suffered this terrible loss of memories.

Really, there's no fun in getting old, is it? Not if we are going to be docked by all these problems and difficulties and ailments.

Now, there's a stark reality of getting old and living to a ripe old age. I hope you young people are not despairing by now.

[21 : 02] But, you know, you've got to think about it. If you're caring for the old family members, you can see for yourself what it's like.

Now, one would have thought that faced with such painful realities about the shortness of life, about its miserable end, we all would sit up and take notice and be wise about how we live.

The unfortunate truth is most people don't. They just get on with life as if death is never ever going to happen to them. They ignore the warning signs. As one of my wife's friends, they had a group of mothers who meet together regularly and so on, and this lady, she actually is the fittest of them all.

She goes to gym every day. She looks after her diet and everything else. There's nobody within the group that looks after her health as much as she does.

And the warning signs came when she began to suffer back ache and things like that. It never seemed to go away. Went to see the doctor. People say there's nothing wrong with her.

[22 : 14] Maybe she over exercise, you know, and so on. But at the beginning of this year, without our knowledge, she was found to have stage 4 cancer.

And within six months, she was gone. And when we went to the funeral, every one of us said she was the last one we expected to die so quickly.

But she died. She died. Don't ignore the warning signs. During COVID-19, some people who didn't believe in it shut their minds off, didn't they?

And believe it is not real. Don't do that. Don't say, I'm not going to think about that. Because it's going to happen. Now, that's what the psalmist noticed in verse 11.

Who knows the power of your anger? What does it mean? He says that many people never ever give thought to the fact that God is angry with us and that's why our lives have come to such a miserable end.

[23 : 20] Is God's anger ever in the equation of life and death? Never. Not even in the church sometimes, which is really sad. That is apparent in many of the new songs we sing nowadays.

Very seldom do you find, for example, the word sin in our songs. God's anger against sin. There's always blessing. There's always power. There's a lot of talk in many churches about the love of God and the gift of his son, the Lord Jesus Christ to us, especially during Christmas.

But often nothing is said about God's anger and God's judgment against our sins. It's almost as if we all have been very naughty and God in his great mercy and love has given us his son so that we all can learn how not to be naughty by following his son's example.

Or at best, since God loves us so much by giving us his son, let us love him in return. Now the stark reality is God gave us his only begotten son in order that his anger against us and our sins may be pacified, averted by his son's death on the cross.

[24 : 43] That's what happened at the cross. Now I'm not denying God so loved us that he gave us his only begotten son. But he did so because his anger against our sins had to be pacified and averted, turned away from us.

The penalty of our rebellion had to be paid for. That's why Jesus died on the cross for you and for me. To pay for the penalty of our sins.

To pay for the death you and I should have died for our sins. And why? Because God's punishment anger rests upon us because of our sins.

and Jesus died to turn God's anger aside from us. Now if the church doesn't say anything about God's anger against sin and God's judgment upon sin, we shouldn't wonder that the world has no clue as to why there is suffering and death and evil in our world.

Let me explain. If you merely preach a God of love and nothing about our rebellion against him and his anger against us, when the world hears it, they will always say, how can your loving God allow evil and suffering in our world?

[26 : 06] That's what they would say. They will not understand that we, each one of us, have actually brought all this suffering and evil and death upon ourselves.

They will never understand will they that suffering evil and death are but the outworking and the consequences of God's anger against our rebellion towards him.

Just as the psalmist says here, that's why the psalmist appeals to us, doesn't he, in verse 12, teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain a heart of wisdom.

Lord, when we see how brief life is, when we see how death comes to all of us, when we see how getting to a ripe old age is no fun after all, help us, make us think, make us understand, teach us so that we may be wise.

And wise in what way? In that we see there's more to death than just a natural process. it's not natural, it's God's punishment upon us, wise in that we understand suffering, evil, and death have all come to us because we have rebelled against God and they are his just punishment.

[27 : 28] That is what the psalmist means by gain a heart of wisdom. Not the wisdom of our news media which ignores God and ignores God's anger and so on.

Not the wisdom of our university halls because never speak about things like that. This is a wisdom of God. And if you're not going to learn from the painful realities of life here on earth, when will we ever learn?

Learn it while you can. Be honest with yourself. Don't silence your conscience this morning. Recognize that these painful realities, are our doing.

And that God is merely meeting out what our disobedience and our sin deserve. Death. I mustn't stop there because the psalmist does say something else.

And this is what really surprises me. Note how the psalm begins. Verse 1. Lord, you have been our dwelling place throughout all generations.

[28 : 44] In the context of verses 3 to 12, which we have looked at, how could the psalmist praise God for that? How could he delight or bask in the reality of God?

You know, time and again, we have been told where there is evil and suffering and death, God cannot be there. Indeed, how could he? if he was God and evil and suffering is there, he is either powerless, helpless to do anything about the evil and suffering, in which case, why believe in such a God?

After all, he is powerless, correct? Or if he exists, he must be a cynical and cruel God to allow suffering and evil in our world. Now, that has been the two positions taken by most people when it comes to God in the face of evil and suffering and death.

And either way, he is not a God worth believing in if he exists. But the psalmist says, you, God, you have been our dwelling place, not just now, not just in the past, but throughout all generations.

And what he means is God, we have tried to find a foothold to find meaning in all of these painful realities of life on earth, but without any success. We have tried philosophy, it didn't work.

[30 : 07] We have tried science, it doesn't work. We have tried economics, we have tried politics, they have all failed us to find meaning in life. There is no refuge in these things. They brought us no comfort.

But when we turn to you, when we turn to you, what do we find? You are our dwelling place. you are our comfort and our refuge.

And so we escape to you, we run to you, we depend upon you. In a way, the psalmist is not afraid to admit, can I put it like this?

Reverently, that God is his crutch. Do you get what I mean? The world laughs at Christianity, I tell you why, because they say Christianity is a crutch for people who want to escape from the painful realities of life.

I, for one, as a Christian, am not ashamed to admit that I am so glad God is my crutch. When I ended up in hospital with a bleeding ulcer 27 years ago, and I wasn't sure if I was going to live till the next day, I can tell you how grateful I was that I had God as my crutch.

[31 : 40] A God to lean on, a God to depend upon, far better than the many other crutches people resort to nowadays. Some turn to drugs, don't they?

That's a big problem here in Sarawak, I understand. Others turn to alcohol, don't they? And that too is a big problem in Sarawak, isn't it? But the psalmist believed in God and what a great God he is.

And the psalmist has his personal relationship with his great God and so, no matter how great the problems of life might be, they can never overwhelm him.

because his God is greater than all these problems. Not only so, having learned from past generations of believers in God and from his own experience of God, the psalmist is now able to tell you and me to seek God for three blessings in verses 13 to 17, if you turn to them.

Now, these are the flip side of the painful realities we have been looking at. This is the good side of it, can I put it that way? And these three blessings are realities too, realities that you and I can enjoy now if we know God as our crutch.

[33 : 02] What are they? Number one, he just, he urges us to seek God's pity. Verse 13, have compassion, have pity on your servants.

But of course, we won't seek his mercy, would we, if we don't recognize our own sinfulness and God's anger against our sin. We wouldn't think we need it. But because God is angry with us and our sinfulness, therefore, we turn to him and ask for his mercy.

We turn to him in order that he might forgive us. Yes, God is angry with sin, but if we turn away from our sin and seek his compassion, he will be gracious to you.

So come to him. Come in humility and seek his grace and his mercy and his pity this morning. And he will bless you with it. That's one.

Number two, seek God's satisfaction. Do you see that in verses 14 to 15? Satisfy us in the morning with your unfailing love that we may sing for joy and be glad all our days.

[34 : 12] Make us glad. Do you see that? For as many days as we have afflicted us, for as many years as we have seen trouble. I love the realism of the psalmist.

All these people who give you the idea that life ought to be a non-stop entertainment, a non-stop high, and that we can somehow get through it with a constant gleam on our faces.

You see, they ignore the facts of life, don't they? it's not just out there in the world, you know. Sometimes you find it in our churches. I just met someone who recently attended one of the largest churches in Clang Valley, and on the Sunday he was there, the text was Deuteronomy chapter 28.

I'll tell you what it is, all right. He noted that the preacher only mentioned the blessings and not the curses in Deuteronomy chapter 28.

Very interesting. It's there in the Bible, but no, he's not going to mention it. He only mentions the blessings. The preacher completely ignored God's pronouncements of judgment against his own people, mind you.

[35 : 28] Now, in the face of the painful realities of life as we know it, it is foolish not to say an utter illusion to expect that life even for the Christian will be forever a rose garden on earth.

It's not. We are told that, aren't we? Didn't he use the word being afflicted in verse 15, in trouble? These are Christians. Christians as much as non-Christians not only have to live in this fallen world.

we all face the same problems of life. We all have our share of ailments and illnesses and disorders. We all know what it is like to face up to grief and to sorrow and to loss.

us. But the difference is this. Christians have found a refuge from God's anger.

How? In God's pity, in God's compassion, in his unfailing love. And because of that, despite living in such troubled times as we do, the Christian can rejoice and be joyful.

[36 : 38] The Christian knows that each morning, that's what we read here in the South, he can face a new day confided that God smiles at him. He knows he need not face God's anger anymore.

And that is what brings joy. Joy is waking up each morning knowing that you are loved by this everlasting God.

God's love. No matter what your personal circumstances. So we need God's pity because it deals with our sins. We need God's love because it enables us to live joyfully despite all the trials and problems of this life.

But lastly and finally, we need God's power to make our lives and our work count at the end. Look at verses 16 to 17. May your deeds be shown to your servants, your splendor to their children.

May the favor of the Lord our God rest upon us, establish the work of our hands for us.
Yes, establish the work of our hands. Life is short.

[37 : 48] Life is dotted with troubles and problems and tragedies. Life comes to a miserable end. Is life significant? Indeed, can there be any significance?

What's the point of it all if it ends like that? We are no better than dogs, so says the writer of the book of Ecclesiastes. But hold on, hold on, there is significance to our lives if we believe in God, if we have trusted in His grace, if we have known His unfailing love.

For all our frailty, for all our seeming insignificance, God can make our lives count. That is the plea of the psalmist here.

Lord, you and you alone can make our brief life here on earth count for something.
Without you, our lives count for nothing.

But you can make something of real and lasting value out of our very brief life. and you can do it with such power and such grace, such love, that future generations would even call us blessed.

[39 : 07] Lord, establish the works of our hands for us. Make our lives count for you for future generations. So those are the three blessings which come to all those who would take the trouble to number their days so as to get a heart of wisdom.

The blessing of God's pity to deal with your sins, the blessing of his daily love to live joyfully despite the trials and problems of this life, and the blessing of his power to give you significance however weak and useless you may think you are.

may God grant you and me a real desire to get a heart of wisdom today and in the new year so that we may enjoy this wonderful blessings of his grace and his love and his power in this brief life on earth and forever more.

May the Lord bless you. Let's pray. Our dear God and heavenly father, as we come to the end of another year and we look back, while we count our blessings, we also have to count the times when we have failed you and the times when we have been foolish and have gone astray.

We count the number of times when we have been so stubborn, dog-headed, and not willing, therefore, to come to you in repentance and ask for your forgiveness.

[40 : 45] Lord, may these sins remind us again of our need for you day by day, a need for your pity, a need for your love, a need for your power to overcome all these sins and failures in our life.

Our God, we come to you and pray that you will indeed look upon us with your favor in the coming year. For those of us who are going through challenges at the end of the year and looking forward only to challenges, we ask that you may be a secure and dwelling place for them.

May they seek you, may they find in you indeed the God whose love is unfailing. for those of us who have known a great measure of your blessing, help us not to forget who gave us these blessings and that we might count ourselves indeed unworthy of those blessings and still look to you and find our joy and indeed our significance in you.

And so be with us and deal with us according to each of our own needs. And may you be so gracious as to grant us your Holy Spirit to fill us day by day that we might live for you.

We thank you in Jesus' name. Amen.