

## **O God, our Help in Ages Past—A Service based on Psalm 90**

**New Year's Eve Sermonettes. December 31, 2016**

### **God is Eternal—Verses 1-4**

In a few hours people will be joining together at parties, in bars, or maybe just sitting at home in order to celebrate the passing of another year and to welcome a new one. I recently read that about 60% of Americans will watch the Times Square ball drop tonight. 78% will celebrate New Year's in one way or another. It is also America's fourth most popular holiday after Christmas, Thanksgiving, and the Fourth of July. For many people it's a milestone of sorts for many people—it's another year in the books. They made it to the end of another year, 2016 is done and they welcome 2017.

We like to mark this occasion, even if it is something made up by men. The entire notion of dates and years and even time wasn't created by God but was an invention of men. Sure, God certain laws in place, but it is we who came up with a system to keep track of how those laws work. We need time to function as human beings. We are controlled and governed by time (some more than others). Our society starts and ends things based on the concept of time. We remember things based on the passing of time, or dates. 60 seconds in a minute, 60 minutes in an hour, 24 hours in a day, 365 1/4 days in a year. We aren't this way at birth—the concept of time is something that must be learned and grasped in the early years of one's life.

Not so with God. He is not bound to such things as times and dates. He is not up there in heaven celebrating another year with the saints and all the angels. He doesn't work and think and live in time like we do.

In time, we human beings are born, we live, and then we die. Time is an invention of man to help us live our lives, but God doesn't need time; he has always existed. He has always been and will always be. Before the creation of the world, before there was ever such a thing as time, God existed—he exists independent of time and space. In time, everything has a beginning and an end—except for God! He is eternal, he was before time began, and he will be after time ends!

A thousand years in the eyes of the Lord are like a day, or like a watch in the night. The Jews had three watches of the night—each lasting what we would call four hours. Most of us sleep during those hours and they pass in an instant—that is what the passing of time, even a thousand years is to God—just an instant. They are nothing, a drop in the bucket for our eternal Lord.

The Apostle Peter quotes verse four when writing to those who were wondering why the Lord was so long in returning, after all he did say in Revelation that is he is coming soon. But to the eternal Lord, he has only been gone a few short days—or even a few short hours.

Not only in the Lord eternal, but he also doesn't change. Throughout the ages he has always remained the same. He has always carried out his will. For years God's people had come to the Lord and he protected them, he watched over the lives of his people, he became their dwelling place. And so, if the Lord had done this in previous years, the one who does not change will continue to be our dwelling place. Even though times change, people change, and the years go one and on, we have a changeless God with a changeless gospel.

And God works through that gospel to make us eternal and changeless. He brings us to faith by which we receive the gift of eternal life with him forever. Think about that all you want, but you won't be able to completely understand it—we'll be eternal. We are who are bound to time,

governed by dates, we will be like God. In the third stanza of “Amazing Grace” we sing about something that we just can’t comprehend—when we’ve been in heaven 10,000 years, we have no less days in heaven than when we’ve first begun. That is because heaven is eternal—it has no end but goes on forever. But we won’t even have the concept of a year in heaven. We will live in the eternal moment—forever with the eternal Lord, our dwelling place now and forever.

### **Man is Mortal—Verses 5-12**

How many years have you seen in your life? How many times have you celebrated the passing of a year while welcoming a new one? God may be eternal and immortal, but we are most definitely not. The oldest person who ever lived was Methuselah; he lived to be 969 years old. That’s a long time, just think of how the world has changed in the past 969 years! But that isn’t even a thousand years, just a short time in the eyes of the eternal God.

That’s the thing about us. We are all sinners, and the wages of sin is death. Death is what awaits all of us—it is a judgment of God that no one can escape. Moses knew this all too well. God had led the Israelites to the edge of the Promised Land, but when 12 spies were sent into the land and gave a report of how big and powerful the people were and how fortified were their cities, the people got frightened and wanted to return to Egypt because they didn’t trust that God would give them the land. As a punishment for their unbelief and rebellion, God made the Israelites wander in the wilderness for 40 years and during that time every adult, 20 years and older would die; the bodies of millions of Israelites scattered all throughout the sand. Even Moses and Aaron would die without stepping foot in the Promised Land. Only two men, Caleb and Joshua, two spies who didn’t agree with everyone else, were allowed to enter the Promised Land. But even they would eventually die.

So Moses wrote, **The length of our days is seventy years—or eighty, if we have the strength; yet their span is but trouble and sorrow, for they quickly pass, and we fly away.** The life expectancy in the U.S. right now is 78.74 years. During those 78 and 3/4<sup>th</sup> years we strive to have a good time, to have a good life. And our lives are certainly filled with good times. But they are also filled with trouble and sorrow. Sickness, sadness, pain, sin, and wickedness—the world, people around us, and we ourselves are filled with such things. If we are honest about it, we’d have to admit that our lives aren’t always roses and lollipops.

In the grand scheme of things, 70-80 years is not long at all. They quickly pass. We want our lives to be great, we don’t want to suffer. We want the next year to be better than the last. But in the end, the 70-80 years on this earth don’t really matter all that much. They are just a small little moment in time.

But the life after this? That lasts forever—it never ends. It’s either eternal joy in heaven with our Savior, or eternal death and pain with the devil in hell. There is nothing bad about heaven and there is nothing good about hell. And those are the only two options—for eternity. In view of this, then, who cares about how fun and good your 70-80 years on this earth are. They do not matter in the long run. What matters is where you are going to spend eternity.

So we pray along with Moses, **teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain a heart of wisdom.** See what is truly important. Our days in heaven, not our days on earth. We pray that we might realize this and live our lives accordingly. As Jesus says in Mark 8, **What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?** If we have to give up certain things, if we have to suffer in this life for the sake of Christ’s gospel, for our faith, and for the sake of

others, we do it. It is small price to pay for the eternal life that Christ gives to us. Because that is the only answer to life's 70-80 years of trouble and sorrow. Eternal life has been won for us by Christ. By his perfect life, suffering and death, and his resurrection from the dead, forgiveness has been earned and eternal life has been won. Through faith in him we will live in heaven with him—enjoying a life free from sin and the effects of sin. How many New Year's celebrations have you seen? In the end, it doesn't matter much at all. We all live for a short while and then we die. But life in heaven or in hell, that lasts forever. Make our hearts wise, O Lord, that we may live with you forever.

### **Mortal Man needs God's Grace—Verses 13-17**

You have heard a lot of talk recently about legacies. What sort of legacy is our president going to leave behind after 8 years in office? There have been many celebrity deaths this year, just like any other year; but you hear all sorts of questions about the legacies an actor or actress leaves behind in the movies they starred in.

Our lives are over in an instant. We are like grass—it gets cut, but it keeps growing until it gets cut again. Generations come and generations go. You have come, soon you will be gone and someone else will take your place—the world was around before you came; and it will survive long after you are gone. Our lives are important to us while we live and important to those around us for a while afterwards, but soon we are gone and forgotten. Who we were and what we did is all but forgotten. While you lived your life you were concerned with wealth, happiness, beauty, power, knowledge, an easy life, and much more. But in the end none of those things have any real value or meaning. Maybe 2016 was a good year for you, maybe it wasn't. But in the end, it is just another year closer to the year of your death, another year closer to the time when you will be forgotten.

So we pray for God's mercy and grace. We pray that he would have compassion on us, would not treat us as our sins deserve. That through his son he would consider us pure and innocent and save us from the eternal death that our sins deserve. We pray that we would live even though we die. For we realize that he alone can rescue us from the wretched state that we are in. The Lord has always been the dwelling place for his children. Moses knew that and so did the Israelites. Time and time again the Lord had rescued them from danger, guarded and protected them from their enemies. He had forgiven them and saved them on many occasions. So they prayed that God may have compassion on them once again. They wanted to see his grace and the next generous to see how loving he truly is.

That is our prayer too—he is our only hope, our only help at all times. We pray that we may see his grace and that the next generation may see the praise-worthy deeds of our God.

And how does this happen? Through the means of grace, the gospel in Word and sacraments. It is through the gospel that we see his love and mercy. It is through the gospel that the Lord comes to us, forgiving us, saving us, bringing us to faith. It is through the gospel that the next generation is able to see the love and grace of our Lord.

We talk about legacies; we talk about how people may remember us. But let's face it, very few people leave lasting legacies. How many people remember who you were or what you did, 10 or 20 years after your death. What about 50 years? 100? It is a pretty safe bet that no one is going to remember you 100 years from now, let alone 1000 or 2000!

So what is to be our focus during our 70-80 years on this earth? What kind of legacy are you going to leave behind? In the end, there is only one thing that matters and that is the gospel. The

gospel brings with it the gift of eternal life for all who believe. And in the end that is thing that is truly lasting—only one thing that will be remembered. True, it may be all but forgotten by men, and maybe even looked down upon. But not by those who are in heaven, not by our Lord. If you are concerned about your legacy, or even if you're not, let us work toward the one thing that truly lasts. Moses prays at the end of our Psalm, **establish the work of our hands for us—yes, establish the work of our hands.** This is a prayer that God would bless the work we do for the gospel, that we may do all we can to share the gospel with others and do all we can to help spread the gospel throughout the world. It is a prayer that God has blessed in 2016 and will continue to do so in 2017—his favor will rest on us and he will bless the work we do for the gospel so that many others may join us in eternity.