

Psalm 111

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[0 : 00] Let's open with a word of prayer. May the words of my lips and the meditations of all our hearts be now and always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our Redeemer.

Amen. This evening we're looking at Psalm 111. It's part of a pair. Even if you look at the NIV in English on page 614 in the Church Bibles, you'll see its mirror image next to it, Psalm 112.

Our Psalm, 111, is all about God. Next week's is all about the godly man. The parallels are all the more obvious when you realise that Psalm 112 is about the godly man, singular.

So, for example, in verse 3b, the verses are identical in Psalm 111 and 112. It is said of both God and the godly man that his righteousness endures forever.

The other thing that both Psalms have in common is they're both acrostics. That means that the lines start with successive letters in the Hebrew alphabet. There are, other than the praise of the Lord, 22 verses, or 22 lines, which in fact in English turns into 10 verses.

[1 : 32] The psalm has a fairly simple structure. There's a one-verse introduction, verse 1, as you might expect, and a one-verse conclusion, verse 10.

The core is verses 2 to 9, and it's divided into two parts. It's about the works and the word of the Lord.

The works is verses 2 to 7a, and the word is verses 7b onwards. But I'm going to particularly focus this evening on one verse and then work it out a bit beyond that.

I'm going to focus particularly on verse 2. Great are the works of the Lord. They are pondered by all who delight in them. They're sometimes said to be the research scientist's mandate, if the research scientist is a Christian.

And if the emphasis in the acrostic falls on the first word in the verse, in the line I mean, in the Hebrew, the words are great and pondered.

[2 : 48] Great are the works of the Lord, pondered by all who delight in them. But what are these great works of the Lord?

It's worth a little look to see what the word works means. I mean, when you heard it read a few minutes ago, you'll have observed that the psalm is more about God's actions in history than it is about creation as a whole.

Look at verse 4. He has caused His wonders to be remembered. Or even more importantly, verse 6, He has shown His people the power of His works. But I feel sure that verse 2 is primarily about creation.

And the reason for that is the parallel with the equivalent verse in Psalm 112. Looking at the first half of the verse, great are the works of the Lord, Psalm 111, mighty will be His children in the land, verse 112.

It seems to me that those are very parallel and that the works of the Lord are, as it was put by someone, the mountains and the molecules and the works of the godly man are His children.

[4 : 14] in each case, the psalm is talking about creation. So I'm going to look at verse 2 primarily with reference to God's works in creation.

Verse 2 of Psalm 112 was famously carved in Latin into the wooden doors of the old Cavendish Laboratory in Cambridge University.

That was probably done at the instruction of James Clark Maxwell, Maxwell, whom perhaps you know, he's Maxwell of Maxwell's equations, a Scot, probably the third greatest physicist ever, who a few years ago acquired a very splendid statue in George Street in Edinburgh.

If you haven't gone to have a look at him, go and have a look and you'll find on the two sides they've got Einstein and Newton, the implication, as I said, being that Maxwell is number three.

When the lab moved from the old lab, it moved in 1973, that same text was displayed on the new Cavendish Laboratory, this time in the prayer book translation.

[5 : 30] The works of the Lord are great, sought out of all them that have pleasure therein. So let's look at what the verse actually says.

In creation, we see God's great works. They are great in magnitude and extent. They are great in number.

They are great in complexity. They are great in importance. Different scientists would focus on different aspects.

The astronomer looks at the vastness of the heavens. The physicist may look at the enormous number of the electrons. The medic may look at the intricacy with which we are made.

The theologian may look at the fact that human beings are made in the image of God. greater the works of the Lord pondered by all who delight in them.

[6 : 40] I'm not sure that pondered is the best translation. Sought out or studied would I think be better. It's the word used of Ezra who set his heart to study the law of the Lord and to do it and to teach it.

If we know anything about Ezra we know that he did it meticulously. so should we exploring with telescopes and microscopes and x-rays and maths.

And it's not a dreary task to study or to ponder the works of the Lord. It's to be done by all who delight in them.

That's the word that's used of the godly man in Psalm 112 verse 1 who finds great delight in the Lord's commands. It's the word used in Isaiah 62 verse 4.

No longer will they name your land desolate for the Lord will take delight in you and your land and your land will be married.

[8 : 01] Another way we might think about the greatness of God's works is through the famous words of the seraphim in Isaiah chapter 6. Holy, holy, holy is the Lord almighty.

The whole earth is full of his glory. glory. I've known that verse for years but I came across one the other day that gave me even more excitement.

I discovered that we can delight in God's world because it is full not only of his glory but of his love. Listen to Psalm 33 verse 5.

The Lord loves righteousness and justice. The earth is full of his loving kindness. As scientists we are exploring something put together with love in love.

Let's move on for a moment to verse 3. The word translated which is glorious and majestic are his deeds.

[9 : 15] The word translated deeds could in fact be translated works as in verse 2 but it's more likely on the basis of the frequency of use that it's referring to God's acts in history.

The Psalmist is moving from the works of creation in verse 2 to the works of redemption in verse 3. Those studying biblical history see great works just as scientists do.

They study them and they see the actions of the righteous God. Glorious and majestic are his deeds and his righteousness endures forever.

And although at the beginning I said I wanted to divide the Psalm into God's works and God's word, works and creation and redemption and his word, I think we're going to find it more helpful this morning if we see how this Psalm speaks of the God whose works they are.

And I've picked out two pairs of descriptions of God that I want to use this morning. These aren't necessarily words that are actually used in the passage but they are definite themes.

[10 : 38] Reliable and righteous and gracious and generous. Great are the works of the Lord, it says, of the reliable and righteous one, the gracious and generous one.

So let's explore those four words. Reliable, verse four talks about the Lord having caused his wonders to be remembered.

And we remember his wondrous works because verse five he remembers his covenant forever. He is reliable as regards his covenant.

But verse seven perhaps is the most, is the clearest verse. The works of his hands are faithful and just. All his precepts are trustworthy.

Both faithful and trustworthy have the same root. Perhaps reliable would suit both. The works of his hands are reliable and just.

[11:50] All his precepts are reliable. God acts in ways he promised and in accordance with justice. His word is trustworthy and we can rely on it.

The reliability of the Lord's actions and of the world that he has made is the essential requirement for the scientific endeavour.

The definitions of the SI units for anything but think of length or time depend on it. On a more simple level the acceleration due to gravity is the same tomorrow as it was yesterday and so we can get on with our work.

C.S. Lewis put it thus, God has given to his works his own character of truth, firmness and veracity. humanity. They are watertight, faithful, reliable.

A result of believing in creation is to see nature not as a mere datum but as an achievement.

Perhaps I've said too much about research scientists and maybe you feel this is not the psalm for you.

[13:18] So perhaps this is the point at which I should encourage those who are not scientists to ponder God's works in nature. The great preacher Spurgeon wrote, Many are ignorant of what their creator has done and hence they are foolish of heart and silent as to the praises of God.

This evil can only be removed by a remembrance of God's works and a diligent study of them. to this therefore the psalm is meant to arouse us.

So the psalm's for you too. It's not just for a small group. The Lord is reliable and righteous.

Not only is God reliable but he is righteous. His behaviour is not only consistent with what he promised but with his very nature. In the passage words like holiness and uprightness are used.

And the godly man who's one who exhibits that righteousness. And there are lovely pictures that you'll see next week of what righteousness looks like. And so I'm going to leave that for next week's preacher to explore that subject.

[14:42] I'm going to concentrate in the first pair on reliable but not to neglect his righteousness. Reliable and righteous, gracious and generous.

God's grace is perhaps our greatest joy as believers. And here that grace is seen in the Lord bringing his people out of Egypt.

Egypt. I'll come to that in a moment. Psalms 110 to 114 are all linked together. They are a group.

If you look at the text you'll see that there are praise the Lord's at the beginning or ends of Psalms. One Psalm has it at the beginning and the end. But there's only in fact one between each pair of Psalms.

the praise of the Lord's are like railway couplings on a train. They're joining it all together. So this is all a group from 110 to 114.

[15:53] And 114 is very obviously focused on the Exodus. It starts, when Israel came out of Egypt, Jacob from a people of foreign tongue.

The sea looked and fled, the Jordan turned back. But again, that's for another sermon. But our Psalm, Psalm 111, is also Exodus focused.

The wonders of verse 4, though unspecified, surely include the crossing of the Red Sea. He provides food for those who fear him, verse 5a.

Surely that is looking to the manna in the desert. He brought out his people and established his covenant. That's verse 9b.

He ordained his covenant forever. They saw how awesome he is, verse 9c. And then, as they moved into the promised land, he gave them the lands of other peoples.

[17:00] That's verse 6b. It's worth perhaps noting what Kidna points out, that the reassuring stability of verse 7, the works of his hands are reliable and just, all his precepts are reliable and trustworthy, is at one with the awesome activity that we see in some of the other verses, his wonders in verse 4, giving his people the power, showing his people the power of his works, giving them the lands of other peoples.

There's that reassuring stability, going together with his awesome activity. And as we think about grace and generosity and our experience of God, we're aware that our focus is less on the exodus and more on the greater exodus that Jesus accomplished for us, that he's ordained a new covenant, that he's fed us and given us grace and compassion as often as we needed it.

But we still like to look back to those great events of the exodus. Verse 4b is an obvious quotation. The Lord is gracious and compassionate.

It looks back to Exodus 34 verse 6, where the Lord passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, the Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness. And if it tripped you up a little bit in the psalm because it's gracious and compassionate, not compassionate and gracious, well that's because it's an acrostic and he needed gracious is the first word of the line, so he has to swap the words around.

[19 : 04] But that's the way it works. the key word perhaps is gracious. I think I want to put the emphasis on that one, indeed I did. And just as his reliability is what makes it possible for us to be research scientists and to study his world, it is God's grace and generosity that makes God's creation so delightful to us.

The agriculturalist studies God's creation and rejoices at God's provision and all the abundance that he sees. Or the mathematician looks at the patterns in nature and is able to describe them in beautiful equations and he rejoices too in God's grace.

So as we look at this psalm, whether we're a scientist or a theologian or anyone else who is being urged to look at it with enthusiasm by the great Spurgeon, our response is the response of the psalmist.

Verse 1, I will extol the Lord with all my heart in the council of the upright and in the assembly. That's a small group I think, the council of the upright and the assembly is the big one.

I guess we're going to extol him in the growth group or roots group and in the congregation. And then verse 10 is an important part of our response.

[20 : 46] It ends, to him belongs eternal praise. But it also gives us some more important information, instruction. verse 10a, the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

It's a very famous verse, it appears lots of times, particularly in the wisdom literature. And here I think it tells us that God's people have the key to what life is about.

If only we look at it with reverence. God's people because in verse 12b we see all who follow his precepts have good understanding.

Isn't that exciting? As I say, we have the key because we know that we're looking at a world put together with love and grace and generosity and reliability and righteousness.

So let's read verse 2 one more time. Great are the works of the Lord. They are pondered by all who delight in them.

[21 : 59] Great in so many ways. Extent. Number. Importance.

Intricacy. Works in creation above all but also works in history. They are the works of the Lord, the reliable and righteous one.

Of the generous and gracious one. They are works that we seek out. That's the task of the scientist but also of the theologian and all who are here today.

And we do that not just as a job if it is well blessed to have that as our job but we do it as a delight because we delight in them.

Let's pray. And I thought this evening I'd use a prayer which was found amongst the great James Clark Maxwell's papers. so I'll use that to finish.

[23 : 11] Almighty God who created man in thine own image and made him a living soul that he might seek after thee and have dominion over thy creatures.

Teach us to study the works of thy hands that we may subdue the earth to our use and strengthen the reason for thy service and so to receive thy blessed word that we may believe on him whom thou hast sent to give us the knowledge of salvation and the remission of our sins all of which we ask in the name of the same Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.