

“Oh God, Our Help in Ages Past”

Psalm 90, 1 Corinthians 1:30

A Sermon for the Season of Lent

Isaac Watts (1674-1748) wrote this hymn about the brevity of life, based on Psalm 90. There it says in the fifth stanza: “Time, like an ever-rolling stream, soon bears us all away; We fly forgotten, as a dream dies at the op’ing day.” All our works pass away.

Time is an ever-rolling stream, and you can’t step into the same stream twice. Everything changes. At the same time, we affirm the Lord is “our shelter from the stormy blast, and our eternal home.” As the Psalmist says: “Thou hast been our dwelling place in all generations” (Psalm 90:1).

There is something basic to what this is about. It is not our works, but the Lord upon whom we depend. At the center of this particular Psalm is the key verse: “So teach us to number our day that we may get a heart of wisdom” (Psalm 90:12).

In order to see this I want to point out three ways that wisdom is used in the Bible.

The first way is found in the book called Ecclesiastes. We don’t use it very much and that’s probably because it’s one we shouldn’t use.

When Luther put together the Old Testament, he put this book with the Apocrypha. What does it say? I’m not recommending it: Ecclesiastes 2:18 says: “I hated all my toil in which I had toiled under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to the man who comes after me, and who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool?”

Who hasn’t thought about that?

Then Ecclesiastes 8:16-17:

“When I applied my mind to know wisdom, and to see the business that is done on earth, how neither day nor night one’s eyes see sleep; then I saw all the work of God, that man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun. However much man may toil in seeking, he will not find it out; even though a wise man claims to know, he cannot find it out.”

That’s the human problem. We cannot find out what wisdom is. That’s the first way “wisdom” is used and understood.

And the second way wisdom is used is found in the book of Proverbs. In Proverbs 9:10, it says: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.”

That’s a very different point of view, and it’s the view that we find in Psalm 90:12: “So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom.”

Over against all of this we have what it says in the New Testament, in 1 Corinthians 1:30: “He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, whom God made our wisdom, our righteousness and sanctification and redemption.”

This is the sum of what Paul has written just before (1 Corinthians 1:20-24):

“Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.”

There we have three different ways that wisdom is talked about. The first way is to say it can't be figured out because life is vanity. It all just ends anyway.

The second is that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and we ask him to show us how to number our days.

But then in the New Testament, Christ is our wisdom.

What do we say about this difference between the Old and New Testaments? A seminary professor once said: All Christian questions come down to this: How do you relate the Old Testament to the New Testament? There is a real sense in which that is true. How do you work it out?

The Jewish people know Hebrew better than we do, and they use the Old Testament very differently than we do. They don't find in the Old Testament what we do.

When we say: “Look, there's an intimation of the Trinity,” in some Old Testament text, they say you're just reading into it what you want to be there, but it's not there. When we find something in the Old Testament and say it is really about Jesus, they say: “You are just reading into it something that really not there. That's not there at all.

And when we look at the New Testament, which often quotes the Old Testament, we see the New Testament really does violence to the Old.

There are two things to be said. What is this wisdom about? We're still talking about Christ as our wisdom.

We have in our tradition the idea that the Old Testament foreshadows the New. We have the idea that there is an intimation of something in the Old Testament and then the reality in the New. For example, there is the promise in the Old Testament and the fulfilment in the New. Or there is the hope in the Old Testament and in the New, it's the reality. It looks forward, and then it is fulfilled.

We can do that even though we have to face the fact that very honest and hard-working Jewish scholars don't find it there at all. We have to respect that.

We have to also remember that there is something very different in the New Testament. There is not simply continuity between the Old and the New; there is real discontinuity also.

What is that discontinuity? That difference is summed up in one thing. There is no cross in the Old Testament.

People have tried to say that the cross is suffering and there is suffering in the Old Testament, too. Think of the suffering of Job. Think of the suffering servant in the Psalms. Think of that little book, Lamentations, which is just a heart-broken person. Or think of Jeremiah and his suffering. These are all well and good. But still, there is no cross at all in the Old Testament. There is a radical difference.

In all that we, Christians and Jews, have together, what we call the Old Testament, and they call the Tanakh, the canonical collection of Hebrew writings, there are crucial differences. That God himself would come is not anticipated in the Old Testament. Not even in the theophanies. The Jewish people have always been and are absolutely opposed to idolatry, and this makes it unthinkable for them that God would become one of us. And that's why, when you come down to it, we aren't Jewish people, and the Jewish people are not Christians.

When we talk about God, we talk about the God who sent his Son to die on the cross, and he continues to be with us in the Holy Spirit. That's the Trinity, and that's a very different matter.

It means that traditional ways of understanding the relationship between the Old and New Testaments—shadow and reality, hope and fulfillment, covenant, salvation history—all break apart when faced with “of one substance.”

He is “the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being (one substance) with the Father.”

What is our wisdom? Wisdom is Jesus Christ. That means that when we read the Old Testament, we read it with cross-colored glasses. We do it quite differently from the Jewish people. That's not to condemn them. We don't do that. But it is to say it's just different. And it's different in a radical way that is discontinuous.

This means that when we then sing this hymn, “O God, Our Help in Ages Past,” we are doing it as Christians. When we talk about our God who is our help in ages past and our hope for years to come, we are talking about Jesus Christ, and the help and the hope come through him. Amen