

INTRODUCTION

We begin the year by worshipping God. We think of who he is and what he has done. It is ironic that worry often follows worship - as if we had forgotten why we worshipped.

This text holds out promise for the future. It contrasts human fragility with God's dependability. The first leads to anxiety but the second gives us hope.

As we think about this we should focus on two things - the contrast and the promise.

HUMANITY AND GOD - THE CONTRAST

There are several Hebrew words for man, each with a different connotation, e.g. humankind, male, or husband. The one used here points to the fragility of human existence.

The text contrasts human promise with what actually happens. We are like "grass" and "flowers of the field", pleasant and productive. But they are destroyed by grazing animals or inclement weather.

Every newborn holds out great promise, but it may not be realised and will end in death. The winds of trouble, temptation or punishment snuff out the early promise.

The contrast with God could not be greater. Two words are used that refer to qualities in God - "mercy" and "righteousness". The former refers to God's goodwill towards us, and showing pity on people in need. The latter refers to the fact that God does right (including keeping faith with people). Taken together they portray God as utterly loyal and dependable. Those two qualities will never fade away.

That is evidenced by the way God rescued his people from Egypt, brought them to the promised land, and taught them his ways (verse 7). The fact that he continued to do what he promised years before shows his word can be trusted.

His people were often disloyal to him but he continued to forgive them (verses 8-10). That gives us hope.

The writer compares God to a father caring for his children (verses 13-14). He is sensitive to our limitations and makes allowances for us. That is so different from the fault-finding and picky image some people have.

Another aspect of God's involvement that inspires confidence is the fact that he governs (verse 19). His throne is "in heaven". His government is stable; it is not at the mercy of outside influences so he can do as he pleases. He "rules over all" so there is no part of our lives that is outside his control.

THIS HAS PROMISE FOR THE FUTURE

The text speaks about mercy as something that endures - "from everlasting to everlasting". His righteousness reaches down through the generations - "to children's children".

Those qualities were always there, in contrast to humanity contrast- we were created and we develop. And they will never end - unlike humanity where the best lives only a short time.

God will always do the right thing. He will be the same God to those who come after us as he was to our ancestors and to us.

He will never let anyone down. He will always hear their prayer. "None of those who take refuge in him will be condemned" (Palm 34:22).

He will still be moved with compassion and reach down to help.

He will always be strong to save. Hard-hearted sinners will be born again the day before Christ returns by the same power that changed us.

We found him ready to forgive. He will be the same till the end of time.

We cannot divorce God's righteousness from God's mercy - it is God acting consistently - "he cannot deny himself" (2 Timothy 2:13).

God has provided a saviour in the person of his Son. Till the end of time the fact that his blood was shed will continue to cleanse people from all sin.

We ought to think about the people who will benefit from God's righteousness and mercy. They are described as "those who fear him", "who keep his covenant", and "remember to do his commandments".

God's commitment is one side of a relationship. His lasting blessing is on "those who fear him" rather than those who distance themselves from him. Indeed, those who reject him will eventually be rejected. A regard for God is a condition for the blessing promised here. It presents as a willing acceptance of his Word, repentance from sin, and reliance on Christ as Saviour.

Keeping his covenant involves more than faith; it includes obedience. The sincerity of such an approach is shown by the care the person takes to live in a way that pleases God – "who remember his commands to do them".

But this is more than a condition. God's righteousness and mercy lead him to bring people into his covenant. If we were left to ourselves none of us would have the fear of God in our heart. It is the Holy Spirit who puts it there. This is a promise that God will continue to take people who are dead in sin and make them alive in Christ.

That is why we live in hope, and look forward to seeing his saving work in the year ahead.