



Women's Bible Study
A Godly Response to Life's Realities: A Study in the Psalms
Psalm 90: When Searching For Life's Meaning
November 8, 2006
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Today we're in Psalm 90. It's one I've always loved, especially the first two verses. So I was a little taken aback to read so many commentaries call this a "dark" psalm, one that is often read at funerals. I guess one of my favorite psalms is a funeral dirge! But after studying it more in depth, I don't think it's dark. Somber perhaps, but very realistic and, I think, ultimately hopeful.

The text says Psalm 90 is "a prayer of Moses the man of God." I had always assumed this meant Moses was the author, but to my surprise, some scholars think differently. Those that believe Moses *is* the author base their arguments on the similarities between the phrases in the psalm and the phrases in other songs that we know Moses wrote, like Exodus 15 and Deuteronomy 32. Portions of the psalm also cause one to think of certain events in the life of Moses and his dealings with the rebellious people of Israel. Some think he wrote it at the end of his life; at least one I read thinks he wrote it while still in Midian, and others think it was written by someone else while the Jews were in exile. You can study this issue more if you like; I found the arguments *for* Moses' authorship pretty convincing. If he wrote it, it's also the oldest psalm.

We haven't talked much about how the psalms are divided, but you've perhaps noticed a "Book number" at the beginning of certain psalms. There are actually 5 books, and Psalm 90 is the beginning of Book IV. Book IV goes through Psalm 106, and these psalms seem to share a common theme more than the other books of psalms. Many of the Book IV psalms make reference to Moses or the time of the Israelites' wandering in the wilderness (95, 103, 105, 106), so one commentator called Book IV the "Exodus Collection." We could even imagine that these psalms may have been read or sung during the Feast of Tabernacles, the yearly Jewish festival that celebrated the Exodus and remembered the wilderness days.

Let's read now, Psalm 90.

*Lord, you have been our dwelling place throughout all generation.
Before the mountains were born or you brought forth the earth and the
world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God. You turn men back to
dust, saying, "Return to dust, O sons of men." For a thousand years in your
sight are like a day that has just gone by, or like a watch in the night.
You sweep men away in the sleep of death; they are like the new grass of
the morning—though in the morning it springs up new, by evening it is dry
and withered. We are consumed by your anger and terrified by your
indignation. You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the
light of your presence. All our days pass away under your wrath; we finish
our years with a moan. 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. Who knows the power of your anger? For your wrath is as great as the fear that is due you. Teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain a heart of wisdom. Relent, O Lord! How long will it be? Have compassion on your servants. Satisfy us in the morning with your unfailing love, that we may sing for joy and be glad all our days. Make us glad for as many days as you have afflicted us, for as many years as we have seen trouble. 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.

Let's divide it into three chunks. Verses 1-6 show the **contrast between man's frailty and God's eternity**, that is, the quality of being eternal. Verses 7-11 show **the wrath of God and the reason for it**. Finally, verses 12-17 record **Moses' requests of God**.

First, **man's frailty and God's eternity**. This morning/evening we sang a hymn by Isaac Watts based on this psalm. Watts' original title for the psalm was "Man Frail, God Eternal" but since hymnbook compilers tend to use first lines for titles, we know it as "O God Our Help in Ages Past." Watts wrote the hymn in 1714, a time of political uncertainty in England. Watts' father had been jailed when Isaac was just a child because of his religious views. When Queen Anne came to power, she brought more tolerance and freedom for Watts' father. But now she was dying and had no heirs. What would happen? Who would be the next monarch? Watts turned to Psalm 90 for comfort and reassurance, and he finds it in the character of God.

Let's notice three things. First, **God is a refuge**—he's our home, or our dwelling place. Verse 1 says, "Lord, you have been our dwelling place throughout all generations." What do we look for in a home? Something with a sense of permanence, right? A strong foundation, a home that won't shake in the wind or let in the coming snow. Something to provide shelter and warmth and light and protection. If we view this psalm in the context of the Israelites' history, think how they needed to hear these words at a time when they were wandering in the desert. They didn't have a permanent temple, but rather a tabernacle or a big tent that they set up and tore down every time they moved to a new spot. And no one had a home! They all lived in the largest campground that ever existed! Can you imagine how hard that was for those Israelite women? To have your nesting instinct frustrated for 40 years?!

I told you last time that we've been building a house. And when I first learned that I would be teaching this psalm I laughed out loud at this first verse, because at the time our family was "homeless." We sold our old house faster than we thought we would and moved out July 15. We didn't move IN to our new house until October 5, so that left us almost 3 months of visiting relatives and staying in the homes of friends who were on vacation (or at least, longsuffering). We were almost as nomadic as the Israelites! At one point I was running errands with the kids, and I said, "One more stop and then we'll go home." There was a pause, and then one of them said, "And where, exactly, is that?" I should have quoted this verse—our home is in God.

Hebrews speaks of Abraham and others who understood this: "*By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob . . . For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.*"

The second thing to notice about God—**he’s self-existent**. That is, he doesn’t need anything outside of himself. He is self-sustaining. Paul explains this doctrine to the Athenians in Acts 17, when he says God is not “served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything else” (17:25). The limits of our own finite existence do not apply to God. He is distinct from everything else.

Related to his self-existence is that **he’s eternal**. Verse 2 says, “*from everlasting to everlasting you are God.*” The attribute of eternity means that he has always existed and he always will exist. I think that’s hard for us to understand—someone who has always existed, who never had a beginning. When we teach our kids this, we show them that animals, for example, are like a line segment. They have a beginning, when they’re conceived, and an ending, when they die. People, then, are like a number line that goes one way. We have a beginning, when we’re conceived, but though our bodies have an ending, when we die, we have an eternal soul that will live forever—either in heaven or in hell. God, on the other hand, is like a number line that goes both ways. He existed from eternity past and will exist to eternity future. He’s not bound by time. There’s a line in one of the lesser-known verses of the hymn “Crown Him with Many Crowns” that I really love—“Crown Him the Lord of years, the Potentate of Time.” He is the ruler of time; he’s not ruled by it, as we are. “*A thousand years in your sight are like a day that has just gone by, or like a watch in the night*” (verse 4). A watch in the night was a 3-hour period.

Contrast that to our plight. We are **powerless and fragile**. We (once we’re grown up) always seem to be surprised by the passing of time. There never seems to be enough of it. And ultimately we all return to dust, according to verse 3. If Moses wrote this, he must have been thinking of Genesis 3, which he also wrote, when God said to Adam after his sin, “for dust you are and to dust you will return.” The psalm goes on to use two metaphors for our lives and their frailty. Verse 5 in the original Hebrew carries the connotation of a flood: “You sweep men away in the sleep of death.” Picture a tsunami of death carrying each generation away. The image is one of **powerlessness**.

Our building site was completely undeveloped—no sewer, no electric, not even an access road. Back in June, after we’d been working on the project a couple weeks, we began to realize that we’d bitten off way more than we could chew. Rich was busy doing the excavation work for the actual house, but we needed to get the road built so the concrete truck could get in when it was time for the foundation. So I reluctantly learned to drive the skid loader & spent many days hauling rock for the road base. And I’ll admit the first day I got in that machine, I was terrified. (I’m the one who had 2 at-fault car accidents in one month this fall, remember? I haven’t historically done well with large machines!) Anyway, I strapped myself in, put my ear plugs in, turned the key, and then noticed a large sticker on the interior of the cab. It said in large letters, “AVOID DEATH.” And then it gave a list of pointers on how not to kill yourself while operating a skid loader! But of course, none of us can avoid death forever. We are powerless to stop that. Hebrews 9:27 says that “man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment.” And God controls when that will happen. Notice the psalm says, “*You return men to dust.*” It’s not fate or accident or bad karma, but God’s word that creates a person and then calls him home again.

The next metaphor is that of grass: “though in the morning it springs up new, by evening it is dry and withered” (6). The image is one of **fragility**. James echoes this image when he writes,

“What is your life? You are a mist (or a vapor, KJV) that appears for a little while and then vanishes.” We hear this theme, too, in Isaiah 40: *“Behold, the nations are like a drop from a bucket, and are accounted as the dust on the scales; behold, he takes up the coastlands like fine dust . . . All the nations are as nothing before him, they are accounted by him as less than nothing and emptiness.”*

Isaiah goes on to describe God as one *“who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers; who stretches out the heavens like a curtain, and spreads them like a tent to dwell in; who brings princes to nothing, and makes the rulers of the earth as emptiness. Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown, scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth, when he blows on them, and they wither, and the tempest carries them off like stubble.”*

By this point you might be agreeing with the commentators who called this psalm “dark.” You may be tempted to despair, especially when as we go through the next section. But hang on; there’s hope!

Anyway, this all leads into the next large chunk, verses 7-11, **the anger or wrath of God and the reason for it.** You see, our greatest problem is not that we are frail, but that we are sinners subject to God’s wrath. Because Adam and Eve sinned in the garden, we all sin, and we all are subject to God’s wrath, and therefore, death. Paul writes in Romans, *“Just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned”* (5:12).

Adam and Eve were not created to be enemies of God. They were created to live in fellowship with God forever. As one commentator put it, “Death is our *sentence*, not our intended lot. Its universal shadow is a standing reminder of our human solidarity in sin, and of the seriousness with which God views this” (Kidner, 330).

If Moses wrote this, perhaps he was thinking of what happened when he struck the rock in anger and God finally disciplined him and the rebellious people he led. Verse 7 says, *“We are consumed by your anger and terrified by your indignation.”* That word translated “terrified” is the word used for an army facing disaster (Judges 20:41). Psalm 30:5 says, *“In [God’s] favor is life.”* Well, here is the opposite. These verses describe what being out of God’s favor is like. Verse 11 says, *“Who knows the power of your anger? For your wrath is as great as the fear that is due you.”* Another way to say it might be, “the measure of the honor we owe you is the measure of our judgment if we withhold it.” That is what sin is— withholding the honor due God. Sin dishonors God by saying, “I don’t have to submit to you as ruler of the universe, and therefore ruler of my soul.” It says, “I don’t really believe what you’ve said—not enough to act on it anyway. I don’t believe you’ll provide for my needs, so I worry. I don’t believe that you’ll take vengeance, so I decide to take it myself. I don’t believe that you are everything I need, so I’m discontent or I’m envious. I don’t believe that you love me, so I go looking for it illicitly.” Sin dishonors God.

And even if we think no one knows, verse 8 makes it plain: *“You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your presence.”* We’ve certainly had a painful reminder of that in the national news lately, haven’t we? Hebrews reiterates: *“The word of God . . . judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God’s sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account”*

(4:12-13). Nothing is hidden. That can be a comforting thought or a terrifying one. Fight the battle against secret sins. Ask God to show them to you—sometimes we don't even realize what they are. Confess them and stay accountable to someone for them. Honor God by believing that he takes sin seriously and has every right to be angry when we thumb our noses at his standard. Part of the nature of sin is that we hardly ever realize the ultimate relationship between death and sin because we're inclined to live for the moment. We don't think about the effects of our sin. But the ultimate effect is death.

Before we move on from this section so full of the wrath of God, remember that only when we begin to understand the power of the wrath of God can we begin to be awed by the power of the love of God. We discussed last week the perceptions we have of the "God of the Old Testament" versus the "God of the New." It is vital to understand that they are the same. God can't change. Yes, Jesus was incredibly loving and kind and gentle. But he also spoke often and boldly about hell, describing it as a place of darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Ananias and Saphira were both struck dead because of lies. And yes, in the Old Testament, God levies some harsh judgments. But he also hides Moses in the cleft of the Rock; he gives second and third and fourth chances to his people. He is described as "slow to anger, gracious, and full of compassion (Neh. 9:17; Ps. 103:8; Ps. 145:8).

Imagine feeling the strongest and most justified anger that you could ever feel against someone. Then imagine allowing your only son to be tortured and killed so that the object of your anger could be restored to your original relationship. That is what God has done. That is beyond comprehension to me. And that is why I believe that this psalm isn't dark, but hopeful.

Moses (or whoever the author is) shows a wonderful intimacy with God in this last chunk as we hear **his requests**. He asks six things.

First, "**Teach us to number our days that we may gain a heart of wisdom**." Our days are brief; life is short. But the prayer is not to gain more days but to gain more wisdom. "Numbering" our days is about using them wisely, not frittering them away in things that won't matter. My grandma had a little plaque on the wall in the room where I always slept. I remember seeing it from my very earliest days. It said "Only one life, 'twill soon be past; only what's done for Christ will last." It was one of the first things I learned to read. I wish I could say I've always taken its message to heart. Leisure time is necessary and good, but beware some of the great wisdom-stealers of our day—television, computers, women's magazines, long, gossipy phone calls, silly romance novels. Be purposeful in what you do with your days.

The next thing he asks is for God to "**Relent**" and "**have compassion**" on his servants (13). Another phrase for relent is "turn back," the same phrase used for what God does to us in verse 3—"You turn men back to dust." Knowing that God has the power to turn men back to dust, the psalmist asks God to turn back from wrath and to mercy and compassion—which is, of course, what he has done over and over throughout history and most definitively through the sacrifice of Christ.

The third request—"Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love that we may rejoice and be glad all our days." Most of us, I suppose, will have a delicious feast on Thanksgiving Day. You know that feeling at the end of the meal when there is nothing more on the table or in

the kitchen that you could possibly want. You have thoroughly enjoyed every bite and now you are completely satisfied. That's how we are to be with God's love. It is enough! It is so hard to be content in our culture. It is always luring us with "You deserve more, you deserve better!" But Jesus is more than enough for all of our needs. Luke warns us about the "cares and riches and pleasures of life." Those are the things that choke the word in our hearts. So often the things we think will satisfy us never do, anyway. Sinful pleasure may thrill us for a moment, but they leave us empty, and thus wanting more and more. Note the contrast between the phrase "all our days" in verse 9 ("all our days pass away under your wrath) and the "all our days" in this verse. If we are satisfied in God, instead of wrath, we have singing, joy, and gladness all our days.

Fourth, **"Make us glad for as many days as you have afflicted us, and for as many years as we have seen evil."** He wants the joys to balance the sorrows. Contrast this to Paul's expectation in II Corinthians: *"For this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison!"* (4:17). Paul is maybe a little bolder, but both acknowledge that God is the source of gladness and joy.

Fifth, **"May your deeds be shown to your servants, your splendor to their children."** Here we see the multi-generational aspect of the Christian faith. We need to remember God's deeds and speak of his splendor to our children and our children's children. My mother has a remarkable, almost unbelievable life story. So many things happened to her that magnify the greatness of God and highlight his hand working in our family that I felt compelled several years ago to write the story down. I had several copies bound as books and gave them as Christmas gifts to my brothers and their families. And this is the verse I put on the title page: Psalm 145:4: "One generation shall praise thy works to another, and shall declare thy mighty acts." By contrast, my life has been more ordinary, and perhaps yours has too. But God is still at work, doing great things for us each day. Do you tell the next generation?

Finally, the last request is this: **"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."** Even though our lives are so short—or perhaps *because* they are so short, we all have a desire to leave something behind, to see our work count for something lasting. But for that to happen, God has to make it happen. Even great things we accomplish ultimately will not last if they're not done for God and with his blessing. Even menial things we accomplish will count for eternity when we do them in His name. I find that especially comforting when I get discouraged about the repetitive nature of housekeeping. You know, the same shirts I ironed last week are wrinkled again, and the same floor I scrubbed yesterday needs scrubbing already. We all must ask ourselves what work God would have us do at any given season in our lives. And then we must do it and ask him to establish the work of our hands. And he will, if we do it for him, out of obedience and with the goal of furthering his purposes in the world--Even if the task is inconvenient or costs us money or is unpleasant. It's really a great privilege to have God make our work significant, especially when we consider how short a time we are here.

But because of God, our brief lives can have incredible meaning. And because of Jesus Christ, we can live in his favor instead of under his wrath.