

Reflections on Psalm 90

Read Psalm 90:1-17

Psalm 90 is the only Psalm in the Book of Psalms attributed to Moses in the superscription (though Moses wrote two other psalms/songs recorded in the Bible: Exodus 15 and Deuteronomy 32). One might expect from the opening words of this psalm that it is another psalm of trust (like Psalm 91 last week), but it takes an abrupt turn (v.3) and is actually another psalm of lament, not of the individual author, but of the whole community of God's people (notice the first plural language – “we”, “us”, “our”). This is a prayer and song for the corporate people of God, especially in times of weakness and discouragement and trouble. The historical context is no doubt the generation of Israel in the wilderness who are not allowed to enter the promised land of Canaan; Moses himself was not allowed to enter the land! Can you imagine how disappointing that was to Moses? This psalm is placed here in the book (begins Book 4) as a help to Israel when they were in exile under God's judgment.

It seems as if Moses is meditating on Genesis 1-3, creation and man's subsequent fall and judgment by God, as he writes this psalm and applies these realities to his situation. *The major thrust of this psalm is the brevity of human life contrasted with the eternity and grandeur of God, yet with the hope that God would renew meaning in this short, troubled life.* This psalm is sobering as it reflects on human mortality and judgment in view of God's incomparable greatness; yet this contrast between God's grandeur and human frailty is ultimately intended for our hope and comfort. For after all, He is “our” God!

Let's observe the three movements of this psalm:

1. A contrast between God's eternity and human brevity (v. 1-6)

Though this is a psalm of lament, Moses begins with an affirmation that God has always been the only “dwelling place” (home of safety) for His people in every generation. Though we are rootless like withering grass in this transient world, God Himself is our secure habitation. Even as something as stable and immovable as the mountains had a beginning, but God is eternal. He has always existed and brought everything else into existence. He is before, separate from and the author of all things. And He is our dwelling place!

But then the psalm takes an abrupt turn and contrasts this everlasting God with the fleeting nature of human life. In a poetic reflection on Genesis 3:19, the psalmist states that God turns man back into dust (“you are dust, and to dust you shall return”). Death and our brief, difficult life, is ultimately the result of God's judgment for sin. Man returns to dust by God's command (“return, O children of men”), not mere natural processes. What we considered to be long eras of time (1,000 years) are like a yesterday or a few hours of the night to God. We are like the

ephemeral grass in ancient Israel that sprouts after the spring rains, but which quickly wilts under the heat of the sun, almost in the course of a single day. In these verses Moses sobers us with our frailty, our mortality, our terrible transience.

2. A complaint concerning God's judgments in the lives of His people (v.7-12)

Moses knows that the cause of Israel's and his present distress is the wrath of God for their sin; a wrath that is terrifying and consuming, yet just. The first application of these words was to God's judgment expressed against the unbelieving Israelites who, along with Moses, died in the wilderness outside the Promised Land. These words also had a unique application to the generation of Israel who witnessed the fall of the Davidic throne and were taken into exile as a result of God's judgment. Yet, as with all the psalms, these words have a general application to believer's today. While, as believers, we do not experience the wrath of God for our personal sin (thanks be to God through Christ! – Romans 8:1), we nevertheless experience the effects of God's wrath in this fallen world...we suffer hardship, pain and death. Moses relates Israel's experience in the wilderness back to the brevity of life experience by all humanity. Our lives contain 70 to 80 years (still true today!) and are filled with labor and sorrow, and are *soon* gone and fly away (in this case not to glory but in the dissipation of death). We presently groan as part of the groaning creation that was subjected to futility and corruption (Rom. 8:20-23). "Life is hard, and then we die" may be a good summary of this psalm.

However, this sobering knowledge of our mortality under God's judgment has a good effect. In v. 12 Moses asks God to "teach us to number our days so that we might get a heart of wisdom." We must have a realistic sense of our mortality and the brevity of this life in order to value the meaning of life and not waste the days we have been granted. "You do not know what your life will be like tomorrow. You are just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away" (James 4:14). "Therefore be careful how you walk, not as unwise men, but as wise, making the most of your time, because the days are evil" (Eph. 5:15-16).

3. A prayer for God's mercy and a renewed sense of meaning and joy in life (v. 13-17)

Moses has the courage, and biblical faith, to ask for God's mercy in the midst of judgment (he has done this before! See Exodus 32:11-14). In a play on words with verse three ("return" used of God's command for man's death), Moses pleads with Yahweh to "return" with favor and grace to His servants. He asks that they would again enjoy His covenant or loyal love and experience gladness in their remaining days, equal to the days they experienced affliction. He requests that God would give a sense of the lasting meaning of life, something that will continue into the next generation. As Moses and that generation of Israel die in the wilderness, has their work been in vain? "And do confirm the work of our hands; yes, confirm the work of our hands."

A Word of Application

As is characteristic of the psalms, the final prayer of this psalm has a much greater fulfillment beyond the days of Moses in the wilderness. God has indeed shown mercy in the midst of judgment, and has not forsaken His covenant love, by sending an intercessor greater than Moses—His own beloved Son. He has borne this terrible and just wrath for us in His death, and has been raised to secure immortal life beyond this brief, transient existence. We have an eternal morning far beyond comparison to this sorrowful night; a morning in which we will be satisfied and “glad all our days,” and will experience the eternal God as our secure and lasting home. Presently, in this brief life of labor and sorrow, we can yet experience real joy and gladness. We are “sorrowful, yet always rejoicing” (2 Cor. 6:10). Because Jesus is risen, God does confirm the work of our hands; it is not in vain.

“Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord” (1 Cor. 15:58).

Pastor Mark

Questions for Reflection:

A thousand years just feels like the past day to God (v.4). Why would Moses mention this in the midst of a worship song? What difference might seeing time from God’s point of view make to you? (see also 2 Peter 3:8-13)

Why is it important for us to have a real sense of our mortality? Why are we often hesitant or afraid to speak about death? How has the coronavirus affected this?

In what sense is the coronavirus an aspect of God’s judgment? In what sense is it not?

Meditate on the fact that all of your hidden sins are right out in the open before God (v.8). How should this change you? Then notice that Moses encourages us to ponder God’s wrath (v.9-11). This should make us eager to run to Christ, who took God’s wrath and restored us to God’s favor, fulfilling the promises of v.14 and 17! Why should we still meditate on God’s wrath, even though we know that through Christ, we have peace with God (Rom 8:1)?

What work of your hands do you want God to establish?