

Psalm 90
God's Eternity and Man's Frailty

Introduction

Very suitable psalm to study at the end of the old year and start of the new year. Time to pause and do some stocktaking. Like God of whom it speaks, this psalm has been, for generations, something to which men have constantly turned for refuge. Some of its phrases have entered our common speech, e.g. "three score and ten". It is the source for the immortal hymn, "Our God, our help in ages past" by Isaac Watts. Its verses are constantly heard when one visits War Memorials in November.

It preaches man's mortality in immortal words. Two parts – (1) the sharp contrast between eternal God and mortal man, and (2) in light of the brevity of man's life, a prayer asking God to do certain things for us.

The stark contrast of God's eternity and man's mortality

With a few bold strokes of the brush, the psalmist depicts God's eternity and greatness. In the history of God's people, **You have been our dwelling place throughout all generations** (Psalm 90:1). The God we worship is the One who appeared to Abraham, spoke to Moses, called Saul, chose David, revealed Himself to the prophets, sent His Son the Lord Jesus, and changed the life of the Apostle Paul. He is the God of the Bible, and the God of His people since – Augustine, Luther, Bunyan, Wesley, Spurgeon, and Livingstone. People have turned to Him in every generation – the same eternal unchanging God, c.f. a great ancestral home, which is in the family for generations, and each generation is born, spends his life and dies there, only to be succeeded by others.

Then the Psalmist looks at the created world. Before the mountains and earth and world, there was God from everlasting to everlasting (Psalm 90:2). (Mountains thought of as the oldest part of creation.)

*"But while mortals rise and perish,
God endures unchanging on."*

When we turn our mind backward – God is always there. When we turn our mind forward – God is always there. God was there when there was nothing else. He is never-ending, boundless, and everlasting. Time means nothing to Him. **For a thousand years (33 generations of men) in your sight are like a day that has just gone by, or like a watch in the night** (Psalm 90:4). Think of all that happens in the lives of men in 1000 years - all the kings, people, rulers, empires, events, and achievements – to God, that was just yesterday. In fact, less than yesterday. A watch in the night was just 3 hours.

With just one word from God, the greatest and mightiest men turn to death (Psalm 90:3). How breath-taking, and how the mind reels to conceive of this almighty, infinite, eternal, living God of the Bible. And how breath-taking that puny,

insignificant men ignore, disobey and blaspheme Him as they pursue their own little schemes for such a brief while. They live to please themselves and for their own glory.

In contrast to God's eternity there is man's weakness and frailty. **You sweep men away in the sleep of death** (Psalm 90:5). N.B. In the AV this is translated "Thou carriest them away as with a flood; they are as a sleep". The picture is of a swollen river, carrying away something in its flood, and it is soon gone. This is a more literal translation. The word "death" added by the NIV is not present in the Hebrew.

They are like the new grass of the morning – though in the morning it springs up new, by evening it is dry and withered (Psalm 90:5,6). In the East, just one night of rain can work a miracle – bring forth a field full of green blades of grass next morning. But the hot scorching wind of the day dries it out, and it is dead by sundown. This history of grass – sown, grown, blown, mown and gone – so like our own history.

The underlying idea of both these images, and whichever translation you use, is the insecurity and brevity of life. Then the psalmist goes on to say life is shorter and harder because of God's wrath (Psalm 90:7). All our sins, including our secret sins, are open to His view. **We finish our years with a moan** (Psalm 90:9). There is no justification for the AV's translation of the Hebrew here as "tale that is told". The basic idea is that our prolonged effort comes to nothing. Compared with God's eternity, our seventy years of life, of which the last few are full of trouble and sorrow, pass so quickly (Psalm 90:10).

These are blunt and brutal facts, but we might as well face the truth. It is wisdom to face this solemn and serious subject. Men reckon on everything except the brevity and uncertainty of life. We cannot stop life moving on. We pass this way only once. The past years cannot be recalled. Even those who live longest say at the end of life that it has "flown by", they don't know where the years have gone. Time seems to go more quickly every year. Only one thing is certain in life – death.

Fervent prayer to God

In the light of these uncomfortable but indisputable facts, the psalmist writes this prayer. An excellent prayer to pray at the beginning of a new year. The psalmist's desire is to face these facts fairly and squarely, and to act wisely in the light of them. **Teach us to number our days aright that we may gain a heart of wisdom** (Psalm 90:12).

It is said that we spend a third of our life in bed. The first ten years are spent in infancy and childhood. Then if we take out the time spent in normal and necessary affairs of adult life, our time left to serve God directly is limited indeed. We are living on borrowed time. We can look back over our lives so far, time which we cannot have back, and consider how little we have done. How much time we have wasted and frittered away on self-centred pursuits. This prayer is that we may realize how much or how little time is left, so that we make the most of what is left.

Augustine was said to number every day as his last day. If today had been our last day, is that how we would have wanted to spend it? Are we satisfied with our lives? We must pray for wisdom to realize that a day not consecrated to the Lord is a day wasted. A day spent not in vital touch with the Lord is a day wasted. A day when we haven't sought the Lord with all our heart is a day wasted. How many wasted days have you had since conversion? How few are left?

*“Redeem thy misspent moments past,
Live each day as if twere thy last”*

We need grace to lament the past, use wisely the present, and realize the future is so uncertain we need to live closely with God and obediently with Him. Life is too short to waste time. F.B.Meyer knew the difference between 10 minutes and a quarter of an hour. Life at its longest is brief. Make sure what is left is wisely and properly spent. View lives as they will look at the last day – this will surely lead to readjustments in lives, reassessment of values, changed attitude to use of money, prayer, Bible, stewardship of time, Christian service.

Satisfy us in the morning with your unfailing love “Satisfy us early with thy mercy” (AV), **that we may sing for joy and be glad all our days** (Psalm 90:14). Either translation is acceptable – early in the day or early in life. We need to know God's mercy early in life so that we can surrender our best years to Him. In fact, most people who are converted are converted early in life. Never despise child conversion. It is certainly possible at the age of 5 to be converted. It is certain at ages 7-8. The possibilities increase until age 11. They grow rapidly till 16. Then they decline till 20, and are quite rare after 30.

*“Saviour, while my heart is tender
I would yield that heart to Thee”*

The Countess of Huntingdon, when 9 years of age, saw the dead body of a little child her own age, being carried to the grave. The girl followed the funeral. Then the Holy Spirit convinced her of her need of a Saviour. “Flee from wrath to come – my dear little children. Fly to the Lord Jesus without delay. Escape for thy life. If no longer in childhood, how much more urgent that we should do so.” (Sermon by R.M.McCheyne). R.M.McCheyne was particularly passionate about child conversion. When he returned from Israel in 1839, he founded 39 Prayer Meetings, including five conducted and entirely attended by little children.

May the favour of the Lord our God rest upon us; establish the work of our hands for us (Psalm 90:17). We ask God to provide stability and success to our work, that it may have enduring quality. May it last because it is in the will of God and for the glory of God.

*“Only one life, twill soon be past.
Only what's done for Jesus will last”*

Then we will not be ashamed when we see Him face to face. **My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power** (1 Corinthians 2:4).