

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	The Psalms		Pastor/Teacher
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FROM EVERLASTING TO EVERLASTING

Introduction: The place of Psalm 90 in the psalter appears to be more significant than with most psalms. It comes right after Psalm 89, which is by some accounts the darkest, most mournful lament in all of the psalter and is counted as the last psalm of Book III. Psalm 90, as the first psalm of Book IV, provides a kind of thematic reset and stabilization compared to the turmoil of 89, without just ignoring the problems Israel faced. With all this in view, it is so much more fitting that Psalm 90 was written by none other than Moses, who so often interceded for Israel and defended them from total destruction under the wrath of God.¹ His psalm gives the people of God the opportunity to take a deep breath, refocus, and see their trials and tribulations in light of who God is to them.

1. The Eternality of God - Verses 1-4

- a. Verses 1-2 shift the scope of the psalm from Israel, by speaking of God as “our dwelling place in all generations” in verse 1 to all of creation in verse 2. This sets up the analogy that is key to understanding the whole psalm, between the plight of Israel and the plight of all humanity. Both, in different ways, have to do with curses that come from breaking covenant with the Lord.
 - i. The Babylonian Exile, for Israel, was in many ways like a reenactment of Genesis 3, with God forcing rebellious sinners out from the land that they had been given, into a more hostile world.
 - ii. Many Old Testament prophets compare Israel with Eden for exactly these reasons, so this connection is really not speculative at all. Israel and Eden are both “paradise lost.”²
 - iii. Moses, as the author of both Genesis and Deuteronomy, was well aware of both points of the comparison here. He himself prophesied that Israel would defy the Lord and be torn out of the promised land.³
- b. When people use the word “eternal” to describe God, it does not just mean that he will never die. It means that he is literally timeless, with no beginning or end. Few passages teach this more clearly than Psalm 90:2, especially the famous phrase, “from everlasting

¹ James M. Hamilton Jr., *Psalms*, Vol II, 154.

² Consider Joel 2:3, which says of the Assyrians coming into Israel, “Fire devours before them, and behind them a flame burns. The land is like the garden of Eden before them, but behind them a desolate wilderness, and nothing escapes them.”

³ “Then people will say, ‘It is because they abandoned the covenant of the LORD, the God of their fathers, which he made with them when he brought them out of the land of Egypt, and went and served other gods and worshiped them, gods whom they had not known and whom he had not allotted to them. Therefore the anger of the LORD was kindled against this land, bringing upon it all the curses written in this book, and the LORD uprooted them from their land in anger and fury and great wrath, and cast them into another land, as they are this day.’” - Deuteronomy 29:25-28

to everlasting you are God.” Whether you look infinitely back into the past, or infinitely far into the future, God simply always is.

- c. Verse 3 contains two subtle references to the curse of Adam’s Fall.
 - i. The first is the idea of returning to the dust whence we came, which is a clear allusion to Genesis 3:19. We human beings have bodies with both a definite beginning and a definite end, coming from infinitesimal particles and dissolving into the same.⁴ We could not be more different from God in this respect.
 - ii. The second is the phrase, “children of man,” which could also be translated, “children of Adam.” Moses (who is the author of Genesis too, after all) is suggesting the reason *why* we are this way is because of our first father.
- d. Verse 4 returns again to the theme of God’s eternity, with another famous line: “For a thousand years in your sight are but as yesterday when it is past, or as a watch in the night.”
 - i. This line does not mean, as some have tried to argue, that when we read the word “day” in Genesis 1 it may mean thousands or millions of years. When God speaks to us in his Word he condescends to our level and uses human words according to their established meanings. He did not convert either Hebrew or Greek into secret codes, or verses like this one into a kind of decoder ring that we can plug into other passages.
 - ii. The point is that, *from God’s perspective*, time is basically irrelevant. Whereas the difference between a day or a thousand years is incomprehensibly large to us, no amount of time has any effect at all on God’s existence.

2. The Frailty of Man - Verses 5-10

- a. In this section Moses expands on the theme he had briefly introduced in verse 3. Unlike God, humanity is as time-bound as can be. From the perspective of God, or even just the larger creation, human lives come and go like a dream (verse 5) or a breath (verse 9). Verse 4-6 weave into this point the motif that God looks at vast expanses of time as if they were a single day. As if even a human life is less than a single day in God’s eyes.
- b. Think of how little you actually know of your ancestors. You do not really know anyone further back than your great-grandparents. Beyond them, you will likely only know basic facts like your ancestors’ names and when they came to the US, or some crime they committed that made the local news. That is not the same as really knowing who they were and what made them tick.
- c. In verses 7-10, Moses makes it even clearer that the curse of Adam’s Fall is central to this psalm. He already made a couple of allusions to it in verse 3, and now we find even more.
 - i. Because verse 7 follows several lines about the general shortness of all human life, Moses is implying that *every single death of a human being is a result of God’s wrath*. We all, without exception, deserve death because God sees all our iniquities and secret sins (verse 8). When did this begin? The answer, especially coming from Moses, is obvious: Genesis 3:19 was our death sentence.

⁴ Many poets and playwrights have been inspired by this biblical idea, including Shakespeare’s musings on the fate of Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar: “Alexander died, Alexander was buried, Alexander returneth into dust; the dust is earth; of earth we make loam; and why of that loam, whereto he was converted, might they not stop a beer-barrel? Imperious Caesar, dead and turn’d to clay, might stop a hole to keep the wind away. O, that that earth, which kept the world in awe, should patch a wall to expel the winter flaw!” - Hamlet, Act V, Scene I.

- ii. The end of our lives is not the only proof of the curse of the Fall. The *quality* of our lives points back to the curse, too. Our days passing away under God’s wrath (verse 9), being full of “toil and trouble” (verse 10) are the other parts of God’s curse on Adam.⁵
 - iii. Many people have argued that Ecclesiastes is written by a despairing nonbeliever, but that book’s darkest observations are variations on Moses’ point here in Psalm 90.⁶
- d. It’s remarkable that even with all the improvements in modern medicine and the average lifespan since Moses’ time, Psalm 90:10 is still not far off. In his day, relatively few people would actually reach 70 or 80, and almost none would live past 80 (even though he himself lived to 120, according to Deuteronomy 34:7). We take it more for granted that we will live that long, with the *average* American lifespan for 2024 being 79.25 years. A lot of people even seem to presume that they will make it to 90! Still, this does not change Moses’ point: even if you are exceptionally healthy, the years will fly by, and you will be near the end before you know it.

3. Verses 11-17 - The Only Right Response

- a. Now that we have reflected on the eternity of God and the inevitability of our own deaths, Moses lays out the only appropriate response for us.
- b. First, we need to come to terms with the reality that all the suffering and death in the world are reminders of God’s wrath against sin.
 - i. As verse 11 implies with the rhetorical question, almost no one actually considers this fact. People, particularly when they are young, live as if they are invincible, and even many who are old or dying desperately seek any means possible to avoid talking about death or extend their lives.⁷
 - ii. This blanket punishment on the whole human race seems monstrously unjust until you see humanity from the standard of God’s Law. When you understand the perfection of God’s Law, you can see how far short of it we fall, and that even the sins that appear smallest have disastrous consequences for ourselves, our neighbors, and God’s creation.⁸
 - iii. As noted earlier, this punishment on the whole human race is the larger problem that Israel’s Exile was meant to point to. There are nearly endless comparisons we could make between Psalm 90 and the testimony of the Old Testament prophets.

⁵ “And to Adam he said, ‘Because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, ‘You shall not eat of it,’ cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground,’” - Genesis 3:17-19a

⁶ Compare Psalm 90 with Ecclesiastes 2:22-26: “What has a man from all the toil and striving of heart with which he toils beneath the sun? For all his days are full of sorrow, and his work is a vexation. Even in the night his heart does not rest. This also is vanity. There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment[fn] in his toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God, for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment? For to the one who pleases him God has given wisdom and knowledge and joy, but to the sinner he has given the business of gathering and collecting, only to give to one who pleases God. This also is vanity and a striving after wind.”

⁷ Not far from us, in Scottsdale, is a cryonics lab called Alcor where they freeze people (or just their heads if that’s all they can afford) with the vague hope that somehow in the future technology will be able to revive them or transfer their consciousnesses to a computer. “A Dying Young Woman’s Hope in Cryonics and a Future,” in the *New York Times*, tells the story of a 23-year-old woman’s fundraiser for \$80,000 from strangers to pay for neuropreservation at Alcor after she was diagnosed with terminal brain cancer.

⁸ Meditate on Romans 1:18-32 and see just how dire our condition is. We choose, again and again in all kinds of ways, to live in harmony with God’s created order, wonder why the world is such a mess, and never repent unless he draws us first.

But in particular, it is significant that God only began to lift the curse of the Exile when they formally and seriously confessed their sins and the *rightness* of God's judgment.⁹

- c. Second, we need God to teach us to “number our days,” and take none of them for granted. This is a key part of gaining “a heart of wisdom,”¹⁰ as verse 12 says, because wisdom requires keeping the big picture in view.
 - i. “Living for the moment,” as many people in our culture talk about it, is really an escape from the responsibility of reflecting on your life, looking behind, whence you came, and forward, to where you are going. Ignoring the reality of your inevitable death will not make it go away, so it is better to face it and grapple with it head on.
 - ii. Pay special attention to the fact that Moses does not simply say, “We will number our days” or “We must number our days.” He calls on the Lord to *teach us* to number our days, because without the work of the Holy Spirit, we will not even really see the full extent of the dangers we are in, much less find a solution.
4. Verses 13-17 call upon the Lord to solve all the problems this psalm has raised. As God's people, we must recognize we are *utterly dependent on him* to address our ultimate problems. We cannot pull ourselves up by our bootstraps and undo the Fall. We must look *up*, above our stations in life, for rescue.¹¹
 - a. Technically, verse 12 was also calling on God, but it was to make us see our *need for salvation*, not salvation itself, as Moses is now calling for in the rest of this psalm.
 - b. When you feel powerless, your flesh's first instinct will be to make yourself powerful, to seek self-satisfaction and independence. But the Spirit would have you turn away from yourself, to God, for deliverance. This is why one of Martin Luther's most-used Latin phrases was *extra nos*, which means “outside of ourselves.”
 - c. We need to call on the Lord to turn away his wrath from us before we turn back into the dust whence we came. Notice the mirroring between verses 3 and 13 both calling for a “return,” but a different kind of return. In our case, the “return” is death, but in God's case the “return” is relenting from the disasters we deserve.
 - d. Verse 13 also refocuses our attention on the people of God. All the “children of man” (verse 3) have the same problem, but only those who are “his servants” know and call out to God for the solution.
 - e. Verses 14-15 petition the Lord for satisfaction, rejoicing, and gladness.
 - i. See how beautifully Moses' petitions here echo the needs of the earlier verses. “Satisfy us *in the morning*” answers verses 5-6. “Be glad *all our days*” answers

⁹ One of the most poignant is Daniel 9, because it is spoken by a man who has personally lost so much in the Exile and yet makes no excuses whatsoever for his people. “As it is written in the Law of Moses, all this calamity has come upon us; yet we have not entreated the favor of the LORD our God, turning from our **iniquities** and gaining **insight by your truth**. Therefore the LORD has kept ready the calamity and has brought it upon us, for the LORD our God is righteous in all the works that he has done, and we have not obeyed his voice. And now, O Lord our God, who brought your people out of the land of Egypt with a mighty hand, and have made a name for yourself, as at this day, we have sinned, we have done wickedly. O Lord, according to all your righteous acts, let your anger and your wrath **turn** away from your city Jerusalem, your holy hill, because for our sins, and for the iniquities of our fathers, Jerusalem and your people have become a byword among all who are around us. Now therefore, O our God, listen to the prayer of your servant and to his pleas for mercy, and for your own sake, O Lord, make your face to shine upon your sanctuary, which is desolate.” - Daniel 9:13-17

¹⁰ Note that in Hebrew, the word for “heart” refers to the mind more often than it does to emotions. So the most straightforward way to read this phrase is Moses asking for wise minds, though that sounds much less exotic and moving.

¹¹ “I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come? My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth.” - Psalm 121:1-2

- verse 9. He is poetically suggesting what he is about to say explicitly in verse 15, that God must match all the suffering and misery of those he saves with greater joys.
- ii. One of the unintended consequences of John Piper’s “Christian Hedonism” way of looking at the Christian life is that too many think of enjoying God as a kind of duty that depends on them. Moses shows us a better way, which is to come to the end of yourself, and plead with the Lord for satisfaction and joy. Take the focus entirely off yourself, stop seeing joy as a work to be accomplished, and you will find a better relief in Christ than all your pious striving can obtain.
- f. Verses 16-17 end with parallel statements about God’s work and ours. By making them parallel in this way, Moses shows that if any human work endures, it is only because God was at work within and without. There is not a thing we do that we can *make to last* if God does not *will it to last*.
 - i. What Moses is implying here, Paul says more explicitly in Ephesians 2:8-10 and 3:20-21.
 - ii. These lines beautifully reflect the central promise of the Covenant of Grace: “I will be your God, and you will be my people.” In other words, that God will draw his people unto himself and dwell in perfect harmony with them. His work and their work will be one, and at that time work will truly be joyful, not toilsome. The thorns and the thistles will be dead and gone, and life as it was always meant to be will truly begin.
5. By God’s grace, we can enjoy a part of these promises here and now, as we appreciate God’s common grace blessings and partake of life in the church. But these promises can only be completely fulfilled when Christ returns.¹²
 - a. When the Jews were singing this Psalm in the Exile, longing for a mediator like Moses to stand between them and God’s wrath, God was stoking the desire for Christ within their hearts. After all, as great as Moses was, he often showed weakness and impatience in his office as mediator, and ultimately failed to enter the promised land himself. Therefore the Jews needed an intercessor who was even greater than Moses, with the strength and righteousness of God himself, to deliver them. They looked forward to his first coming, as we now look forward to his second.
 - b. Remember that part of why it feels like Jesus is taking too long to return is exactly the difference between us and God that this psalm is all about! 2 Peter 3:8 refers to the same idea as Psalm 90:4 to explain why it feels like Christ is delaying. Being God himself, Jesus does not view even thousands of years as too long a delay if it means gathering more of his chosen sheep home.
 - c. 1 Corinthians 15 is the most fitting New Testament answer to Psalm 90. There Paul raises all these issues arising from our perishable nature and exults in the glory of Christ accomplishing what Adam could not. “Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven. I tell you this, brothers: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on

¹² As the Heidelberg Catechism says in the answer to the first question, this life is a “vale of tears.” Trials and temptations that bring sorrow will be dominant until Christ comes to purge this world of every vestige of the great curse.

immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: 'Death is swallowed up in victory.' 'O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?' The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain." - 1 Corinthians 15:49-55

- d. In both Psalm 90 and 1 Corinthians 15, the only reason your efforts will last is not just because they are done *for* God, as many people think, but they are actually done *by* God in you! How great is our God, that although he is eternal and we are so far beneath him in every way, he desires to make use of such weak instruments for such mighty work! And at the center of all this work is our Savior and King, Jesus Christ the righteous who laid down his life that he might raise us up, immortal and imperishable.