

A PSALM OF MORTAL LIMITATIONS

Dr. George O. Wood

Psalm 90 “Lord, you have been our dwelling place throughout all generations. 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 of 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 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 might 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.”

May God add his blessing to the reading of his word.

This is known as one of the great psalms of the Bible. It is a psalm that you will frequently heard said at a funeral service. Because many times people who attend memorial services are unfamiliar with the terminology of scripture, I find myself frequently only reading the first 6 verses and skipping verses 7-11 since that has to do with a discussion of God’s anger or wrath. Since many people’s understanding of the wrath of God is sort of akin to the misdirected anger of somebody they know in family it doesn’t at times seem appropriate because it requires so much in translation.

But we’ll look at the whole psalm today for the psalm in its entirety is important to our faith and our worship to the Lord. It is interesting that we would use this psalm at memorial services and at gravesides since in the Old Testament time and in Jewish life today this is a psalm that’s frequently used in the burial of the dead. It is the Old Testament’s 1 Corinthians 15.

The psalm has four divisions. Verses 1-2 speak to us of the eternity of God. Verses 3-6 speak of the mortality of man. That’s why we have called this psalm by way of title, a psalm of mortal limitations. The third emphasis of the psalm is the effects of man’s mortality, verses 7-12. And the fourth and last part of the psalm is a prayer for God’s grace, verses 13-17.

First the eternity of God. A declaration powerfully of God’s greatness which is illustrated in two different ways. God’s greatness in contrast with human life. And God’s greatness in the creation.

Verse 1 is his contrast in greatness with human life. “He has been our dwelling place throughout all generations.” In biblical days especially in the time before Moses people’s residencies changed, changed more frequently even than ours do today. I’ve been a person who up until my

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adult life lived in many different places. I think I can remember all the places I have lived from about the age of 5 on. Yet this psalm is telling us that our real place of residence is not ever in a place of lumber and brick and glass. Nor is our real place of residence a tabernacle of bone and muscle and nerves, skin and blood. Our real home is in God. In him we live and move and have our being.

Right away the difference between God and ourselves is set forth. We are housed within God. If you are looking for our address, first and foremost you must find it in the Lord. What happens in death is we simply remove all the intermediary addresses that have separated us from God and suddenly we are in God where we have been all along anyway. That's what this psalm is telling us about our mortality compared with God's eternity. In him we live. Psalm 90:1 is our reminder that we have a far larger and longer address than we think we have. In moments of despair and frustration and disillusionment and defeat we recognize that these are nevertheless words. Life in God always exists and we are never dislodged from our true dwelling place.

This psalm is teaching us that in the dwelling place of God we live in one who is personal. His eternity is not meant to be the opposite of our brevity of life. But it is meant instead to be the answer to our brevity. Rather than a putdown to us by reminding us that we are mortal and time based and earth stationed, this great truth reminds us of the hope we have in God. The answer to our brevity is in our residence in him.

The eternity of God is also set forth in the creation by telling us that before the mountains were born or you brought forth the earth and world from everlasting to everlasting you are God. The scriptures bear witness to an uncreated God who stands behind every created thing and everyone as the great "I am."

The dimensions of God's eternity are set forth in measurement to creation. The distance and relationship of time and space have helped us anew get a fix on how great God is. Perhaps we know even more about the greatness of God because we know as Moses did not of the magnitude of the universe in which we live.

God exists outside of time and space, before matter came into being, before the mountains were born or he brought forth the earth and the universe, from everlasting to everlasting he is God.

The dimensions of God's eternity are such however it doesn't take a prayer ten thousand light years or ten million or ten billion to reach him. But since God exists outside of time and space our access to him is instant. The eternity of God. It blows all of our fuses!

That then is compared in the psalm to our mortality as people. Verses 3-6. Here the psalmist compares man and his time on earth and his mortality to four things, four figures of speech.

The first thing that we are compared to is not very complimentary. We are compared to dust. "You turn men back to dust saying, 'Return to dust O sons of men.'" It reminds us of the phrase in Genesis 3:19 when the imposition of death was placed: "For dust you are and to dust you will return."

We know that if the Lord does not tarry and we die that ultimately that is the destination that faces all of us – dust.

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Our time is compared to a day. “A thousand years in your sight are like a day that has just gone by.” A thousand years with God are as a day. I am mortal and passing. If the brevity of my life compared to God’s eternity isn’t sufficiently humbling the third analogy of our mortality is traced in the next phrase, the last of verse 4. “Like a watch in the night.” A watch does not involve being compared to a 24-hour day. But instead, a 4 hour period of time. Our life span is now not compared just to a day but to a watch for 4 hours.

The years of our life compared to God’s eternity is what a penny is to a millionaire.

The fourth analogy that the psalmist gives of the mortality of our life is that we are like the new grass of the morning. What effect should God’s eternity and our mortality then have upon us. When we see God’s greatness in light of his existence and creation and when we see our mortality, what kind of response is being asked for in us? That is the theme of verses 7-12, the five effects that come upon us when we realize our mortality.

All the effects occur because we realize a death sentence hangs over us as members of the human race because of sin that has occurred within the human race

The first effect is one of terror, verse 7. “We are consumed by your anger and terrified by your indignation.” The idea here is not that God is ticked off at his people and is getting ready to club them. But it is the judicial anger that occurs when God imposed the death sentence upon the human race. We may want to argue with God about his reasons for doing that. But the fact exists that there is a death sentence on the human race that is sure.

The oldest living person in the world celebrated his 120th birthday this last week in Japan. I would seriously doubt he’s going to make it to 130. There is death sentence upon us all. The effect of terror and being overwhelmed is a word that is frequently used in the Old Testament to describe people who are facing disaster. When we truly consider the overwhelming magnitude and greatness of God and our own mortality we are confronted with terror, with being overwhelmed. Any one who has come face to face with death in their own life even as a Christian, at least I have, faced that moment of absolute sheer terror.

The psalmist is presenting to us the real psychological impact of the judicial sentence of God of death upon the human race. I think the older theologians were right in saying, We will never know God’s grace until we know God’s wrath. We will never know the magnitude of his salvation until we understand the magnitude of the sentence that is against us. It is not the wrath of a peevish, ticked off deity. But the righteous judicial sentence of a moral God. We face that sentence with terror.

That produces a second effect in us. The effect of inexcusability. Verse 8 “You have set our iniquities before you. Our secret sins in the light of your presence. O God when we try to stand up and argue with you and beg off from this sentence we recognize immediately that none but the righteous and that person who is full of integrity and without sin may approach you. But Lord how can we approach you when you have access even to our hidden thoughts and to our secret things which are not of you.”

That then brings rise to a third effect in our life. That is anguish. “All our days pass away under your wrath. We finish our years with a moan.” What a description of death. Anguish. However witty and articulate we may be in life, in death we are not witty and articulate. There is the sense

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that no matter how much the gift of intelligence and charm that we have in life, death saps it from us. And indeed when you are ill you begin to want to turn loose and to go. The psalmist said it ends with a moan, in anguish.

The fourth effect of our mortality is the limitation it places upon us. The length of our years is 70 years or 80 if we have the strength. This is not a contract guaranteeing the number of our years. Jesus only had 33 years. But is simply another illustration of the brevity of our life. What in contrast to the eternity of God is 70 or if my reason of strength we have 80 or more. That produces then the fifth response.

The fifth effect in our life is one of reflection. Verses 11-12. “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.” Who knows the power of your anger?” A rhetorical question. A question that is saying that in spite of all the preceding signs of God’s wrath the message never registers until it comes home to us. Until we feel the sentence ourselves, then it becomes ours. We know the anguish. So the scriptures tell us the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. That’s why the psalmist says in verse 11 “Your wrath is as great as the fear that is due you.” Because reverence for God is that basic of life without which we never come into relationship with God. We do not take God seriously unless we reverence him and give him awe. Teach us to number our days.

Of all the arithmetic rules this is the hardest – to number our days. Men can number their herds and droves of oxen and sheep. They can estimate the revenues of their manors and farms. They can with a little pain, number and tell their coins. Yet they are persuaded their days are infinite and innumerable and therefore do not begin to count them. Teach us O Lord to number our days.

If the psalm ended there it would end on the down note. But it ends on the up. The psalm comes full circle into God’s grace. Verses 13-17 find the psalm closing with Moses the writer of the psalm directing a prayer to the Lord. It is a prayer for his grace. Now that we know God’s eternity and our mortality we cry out to a personal God. And the great underlying truth of the psalm is that we know personally that God who hung the world in space.

The prayer requests five things of God. It requests compassion. Look back to verse 3 you’ll find the psalmist saying of God “You return men back to dust saying, ‘Return to dust.’” The Hebrew in verse 13 is the same “Turn O Lord.” God had turned men. Now the psalmist in his prayer is saying, Lord, you who turn men, now we ask you to turn. Turn and relent. Have compassion upon us.

That brings then a second prayer requisition that the psalmist knows God will answer. That is for satisfying love. Once the Lord turns and gives compassion on his servants the psalmist says “Satisfy us in the morning with your unfailing love.” We have already found out that in the morning, verse 6 we spring up only to be dry and withered by the evening. But now this is a different morning. A morning that is meant to characterize all our days. A morning which we are sustained by God’s unfailing love. His loving kindness is the way other translations give it.

There’s really a difficulty in translating the Hebrew word that stands for loving kindness or unfailing love. We ask God for life, thinking of quantity – Lord give me quantity of life. He answers by not just giving us quantity but by giving us quality. Who wants to live forever if forever you’re going to have to face the same problems and stresses that you’re facing now.

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How wonderful it will be to have along with the quantity of life the quality of life. “Satisfy us with your undying love and give to us recompensing joy. Make us glad for as many days as you’ve afflicted us, for as many years as we have seen trouble...” Probably here Moses is thinking about the 40 years in the wilderness. Lord, make it up to us!

Having just been in the Sinai I understand how difficult it was. I understand why they needed water. There’s hardly any out there. I understand why they need manna. You can’t grow crops out there. God gave them the, What is it? food. That’s literally what it mean – What is it? They had it for breakfast, lunch and supper. When they complained that they didn’t have meat God sent them so many birds that they got sick. He put a cloud over them. Going in the Sinai that’s important that they get some shade. And at night it’s cold, and it’s important that they get warmed up so he put a pillar of fire by night. He took care of them. It was a little monotonous those 40 years but he took care of them. He had afflicted them Moses is saying, Lord as many years as you afflicted us, make it up to us.

There’s this theme of recompensing joy. It’s a modest prayer. Lord, would you give us enough joy to balance our sorrows so that the scales are even? The New Testament takes us beyond this and says that the joy that the Lord gives is more in equivalence to the sorrow we face in life. There is an overcompensating joy that God gives. So Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 4:17 “For our light and momentary trouble are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.” God is not going to just give us joy for as many days as we’ve been afflicted. But he’s going to give us an over compensation of joy for everything that we have gone through. Recompensing and over recompensing joy.

Verse 16 fifthly the psalmist prays that the deeds of the Lord may be shown to their servants and their splendor to their children. That there might be visible results to the work of God in our life. He closes by asking a fifth thing, that there might be lasting results. Verse 17 “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.”

Two things I want to say about that last request. Establish the work of our hands. One is the meaning of that verse from its scriptural setting. In the Sinai today where this psalm was written you find the Bedouin, the drifter, the nomad, the Bedouin who live in the tents and take the flocks of goats from one place to another as the seasons change. The Bedouins who don’t build things, who don’t farm, who don’t go to school. Many of whom still do not. They are still a migrant people. Abraham had started out when God called him as a migrant much like the Bedouin today, moving and pastoring his flocks from place to place. Not a builder himself, living in tents. The same with Isaac and Jacob. But gradually at Sinai the change is taking place. God is changing his people from being drifting people to people who will move into a country, into Canaan and build. They will farm. They will build houses, they will build cities. The work of their hands will remain. Unlike the drifters of the desert whose tracks are forever hidden within the desert sands and who when their generation is gone no one but the most astute can ever tell that they have been there. Unlike them, Moses is now leading a people who are going to be builders. He’s saying, Establish the work of our hands. He’s reaching into something that we are familiar with. That says, Lord, make my life count for something. When it comes time for me to check out, let me have left something behind that stands and that matters.

That brings me to the second thing I wanted to say. It seems today that I see believer after believer falling by the wayside today. If we have ever prayed “O Lord establish the work of our

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hands for us," it needs to be today. There are so many stresses in our lives and in our culture that can pick us off at a moment's notice and destroy everything we have stood for and longed for and believed in. I think it's time we as believers ask the Holy Spirit to help us draw a wagon around the camp. There is a Satanic onslaught on the church of Jesus Christ today that is hitting leadership, that is hitting marriages, lives left and right. In the name of the Lord we ought to ask as never before, O God establish the work of our hands. Don't let us check out. Keep me true. Help me to run the race whatever age I am in. Lord, help me to run the race. That having begun it I might finish it. Lord, don't let me be a castaway. Don't let what I have done be in vein. Establish the work of my hands.

It is a prayer that I believe God would be pleased to grant. Yes, the church needs to evangelize. It is the most difficult thing to do to get workers to evangelize, to witness, to visit. But while the church is doing that we must keep our relationship in tact with the Lord. And not get lost in the activity of Christianity. But instead get lost in the person of the Lord. We must not get our eyes on people. Except where our eyes on people will help us to live more diligently for Christ. We must keep our eyes on the Lord and have a relationship and a faith that is based on God that asks the Lord to help us stand in whatever trial or test comes our way.

Moses says in Deuteronomy 26:5 that his father [referring to Jacob] as a wandering Aramean. He was in effect a Bedouin who built nothing except he believed the promise and had a family. Now Moses is saying to God's people on the verge of entrance into the Holy Land we are no longer to be wanderers. But we are to settle and make cities and farms and vineyards and be planted.

We who have been brought to Christ likewise are no longer wanderers, drifters. But God has called us to a beautiful and high calling of working for him and seeing our life count for eternity. Let's keep true to the Lord.

Father, in just a few short years if you tarry this psalm that you have given us is reminding us that all of us will be swept away. All of us will lie in the sleep of death. All of us will return to the dust. It's not a pleasant thought. In the day when we want to place an emphasis on what's upbeat, what makes for positive living, we want to think good thoughts and have warm fuzzies, you really mess up our day by reminding us of our mortality. But thank you for messing up our day. Thank you for creating in us through your word the humility we need to have in the face of an eternal God. Help us to number our days. Help us to avoid this crazy circle of running from one good time to another good time without ever sinking the roots of our life into the soil of your word and lie and your body, which will produce good fruit in us. Save us from the endless circle of chasing ourselves and our own self satisfaction. And deliver us for thy honor and glory. We pray for your grace while at the same time we thank you. We thank you for the compassion that we know, that Moses never did. The compassion that is so great that sent Jesus for us. The love that is so satisfying that it can only be described by John 3:16. The joy that is so great that the Father says that the one who comes to me there is rejoicing by the angels in heaven. We thank you for the visible results that you give and the lasting results in this day O Lord when the enemy seeks to wreck your body from within, to pick off leader after leader. Either through outright betrayal and apostasy or through perversion, through an emphasis of things that are not of you and a lifestyle that smacks of American material Christianity and show business. When your enemy seeks to pick off the leadership and to make the Christians the laughing stock of the world. Give integrity to your body and to your people. Give us staying power.

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Help us like an army under siege to remain at our posts until either the time has come to relieve us from that position or until the reinforcements have arrived to take higher ground. Keep us true. There are pressures upon each one of us in this room, pressures in the spiritual world and pressures that effect us in every arena of our life. Each one of us could give testimony that the enemy too has tried to pick us off and keep your work from prospering in us. Keep us true, Lord. Establish your work in us until the day is done and the race is won. Through Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.