

A Prayer of Moses the man of God.

¹ LORD, You have been our dwelling place in all generations. ² Before the mountains were brought forth, Or ever You had formed the earth and the world, Even from everlasting to everlasting, You are God.

³ You turn man to destruction, And say, "Return, O children of men." ⁴ For a thousand years in Your sight Are like yesterday when it is past, And like a watch in the night. ⁵ You carry them away like a flood; They are like a sleep. In the morning they are like grass which grows up: ⁶ In the morning it flourishes and grows up; In the evening it is cut down and withers. ⁷ For we have been consumed by Your anger, And by Your wrath we are terrified. ⁸ You have set our iniquities before You, Our secret sins in the light of Your countenance. ⁹ For all our days have passed away in Your wrath; We finish our years like a sigh. ¹⁰ The days of our lives are seventy years; And if by reason of strength they are eighty years, Yet their boast is only labor and sorrow; For it is soon cut off, and we fly away. ¹¹ Who knows the power of Your anger? For as the fear of You, so is Your wrath.

¹² So teach us to number our days, That we may gain a heart of wisdom. ¹³ Return, O LORD! How long? And have compassion on Your servants. ¹⁴ Oh, satisfy us early with Your mercy, That we may rejoice and be glad all our days! ¹⁵ Make us glad according to the days in which You have afflicted us, The years in which we have seen evil. ¹⁶ Let Your work appear to Your servants, And Your glory to their children. ¹⁷ And let the beauty of the LORD our God be upon us, And establish the work of our hands for us; Yes, establish the work of our hands. (NKJ)

Introduction: Psalm 90 is a pilgrim's prayer. It is ascribed to Moses, who led Israel through forty years of wandering in the Sinai wilderness. Moses lived about 500 years before David, so Psalm 90 may be the oldest psalm in the Psalter. Psalm 90 opens the fourth book of the Psalter (Psa. 90-106) which are distinguished as psalms of comfort in God's faithfulness.¹ Two other songs in the Bible are attributed to Moses: The Song of Triumph (Exo. 15:1-18) composed to celebrate the Lord's victory by drowning Pharaoh's army in the Red Sea, and The Song of Moses (Deut. 32:1-43) composed to commemorate the Lord's steadfast faithfulness to His faltering people.

The title of the psalm, "A Prayer of Moses the man of God," identifies this poem as an intercession by Moses for the coming generations. Described as "the man of God" six times² implies that Moses' high character and office are a guarantee for the inspired authority of the psalm. His word is to be reverently heeded, as the Word of God Himself. This title is also applied to Elijah (2 Kin. 17:18), Elisha (2 Kin. 7:8), and David (2 Chr. 8:14) in the Old Testament, and to Timothy (1 Tim. 6:11) in the New Testament.

The time of the psalm is probably toward the close of the years of wandering in the desert. Moses had witnessed God's mercies as He met their physical and spiritual needs in the desert. He had endured God's judgments as the Lord prolonged their days in the wilderness because of their sin. As Moses remembered the hardships and sorrows that befell

¹ Godfrey, **Learning to Love the Psalms** (Reformation Trust Publishing, Sanford, FL, 2017)

² Deut. 33:1; Josh. 14:6; 1 Chr. 23:14; 2 Chr. 30:16; Ezra 3:2; Psa. 90:1

the nation of Israel, he turned to God in prayer, asking for relief.³

In Psalm 90 Moses prays for Israel, wanting them to learn an important lesson he learned in the wilderness. The journey through the wilderness to the Promised Land could have taken a few weeks. But it took forty years because God judged the Israelites for their unbelief (Num 14:34; 32:13). The lesson is that we are to live in the light of eternity. Psalm 90 gives us an eternal perspective on our short life.⁴

Moses sets forth three truths: The Greatness of God (vs. 1-2); The Gravity of God (vs. 3-11); The Grace of God (vs. 12-17). These truths illustrate an acronym for prayer, ACTS, which stands for adoration, confession, thanksgiving, supplication. Adoration is the expression in the first part on the greatness of God. Confession is the expression in the second part on the gravity of God. Thanksgiving and supplication are the expressions in the third part on the grace of God.

A. THE GREATNESS OF GOD (90:1-2)

To many people God is a mere appendix to life, something to be added on after everything else is taken care of. To others God is a convenience, someone to help them out of their worst troubles and to forgive their sins from time to time. They say, "That is what God is for" -- to help people out of trouble and to forgive their sins. Such people are not really worshippers of God. They are just idolaters. They have made a god in their own image, and they use it for their own purposes.⁵

How different is the God presented in this Psalm! Verses 1-2 state the greatness of God, first, by expressing His immanence, that He is deeply involved with His people (vs. 1), and second, by expressing His transcendence, that He is greatly exalted above His creation (vs. 2).

1. His immanence (90:1). The first word is *Lord*, the name God gives Himself as head of the covenant. He is Lord of His creation in general and Lord of His servants in particular. He is the Lord who has established His control over His people, His authority upon His people, and His presence with His people. The self-revealing God is the potentate, sovereign, monarch, or covenant head. As *covenant head*, He is deeply involved with His people. He is immanent as expressed in verse 1. As *covenant head*, He is greatly exalted above His people. He is transcendent as expressed in verse 2.⁶

The Lord is a personal God, for He is addressed as "Thou" or "You." Many people think of God as a natural force, power, or influence, properly referred to as "it." But the Bible speaks of God as "He" and "Him," and addresses God as "Thou" or "Thee." The Bible speaks of God as a person. This personal God reveals Himself in a variety of ways. A summary is given in Hebrews 1:1-2 which states, "God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son ..." We are exposed to this living and true God in His creation, in His Scripture, and in our conscience.

³ **Number Your Days Aright**, *TableTalk*, July, 1994

⁴ Steve D. Pettit, **Living with an Eternal Perspective**, Psalm 90, 03/07/2022, Bob Jones University, Greenville, SC, www.sermonaudio.com [Emphasis added]

⁵ J.G. Vos, **The Unchanging God**, *Blue Banner Faith and Life*, Jul.-Sept., 1967, Vol. 22, No. 3, p. 121

⁶ John M. Frame, **The Doctrine of the knowledge of God** (Presbyterian and Reformed Pub. Com., 1987), p. 13

The blessed relationship we may have with God is described in a variety of terms. Most important to Moses is that God is our “dwelling place.” Since the calling of Abraham, God’s people have been strangers, sojourners, or pilgrims (1 Pet. 2:11). Yet while the patriarchs were pilgrims, the Israelites were captives in Egypt for 400 years, and the Tabernacle was recently constructed, still in all generations the Lord is their dwelling place. He is intimately involved with His people. He is immanent.

The fullness of the “dwelling place” would be realized by Immanuel, “God with us” (Isa. 7:14; Mat. 1:23). Jesus declares, “I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever” (John 14:16). Jesus exhorts, “Abide in Me, and I in you” (John 15:4). John summarizes by writing, “Now he who keeps His commandments abides in Him, and He in him. And by this we know that He abides in us, by the Spirit whom He has given us” (1 John 3:24). The Lord is the dwelling place of His people. He is immanent.

2. His transcendence (90:2). Verse 2 expresses God’s transcendence, that He is greatly exalted above His creation. The transcendence of God (His exaltation, His mysteriousness) has been misunderstood as God’s being infinitely removed from the creation, being so far from us, so different from us, so “wholly other” and “holly hidden” that we can have no knowledge of Him and can make no true statements about Him. Such a god has not revealed himself to us, for it does not exist.

But God is presented here as absolutely distinct from the created universe. First there was God, then afterwards there existed the world. The mountains had a beginning; God always was. Therefore God is distinct from the creation. He is not tied up or limited by His creation. He is the Creator, high and lifted up, always distinct from all created things.

The idea is that He was always, and ever will be, *God*: the God; the true God; the only God; the unchangeable God. The creation of the universe made no change in Him; its destruction would not vary the mode of His existence, or make Him in any respect a different being. There could not be a more absolute and unambiguous declaration, as there could not be one more sublime, of the eternity of God. The mind cannot take in a grander thought than that there is one eternal and immutable Being.⁷ He is transcendent.

God is working out His eternal purposes throughout all the universe, throughout all of history, throughout all the earth. He’s a great God and so you are living out life today in the context, in the realm of God achieving His eternal purposes. Meditate on the greatness of God revealed in His immanence and His transcendence.

B. THE GRAVITY OF GOD (90:3-11)

The second movement in Psalm 90 expresses the gravity of God. Martin Luther wrote: “Just as Moses acts in teaching the law, so does he in this Psalm. For he preaches death, sin and condemnation, in order that he may alarm the proud who are secure in their sins, and that he may set before their eyes their sin and evil.”⁸ This psalm gives us an eternal perspective on our short life by describing the measure, mortality, and miseries of man.

1. The measure of man (9:3-4). Our destiny is determined by God (vs. 3). Moses

⁷ Albert Barnes, *Notes on the Old Testament*, Psalms Vol. III (Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, MI, 1930), p.3

⁸ J. Vernon McGee, *Psalms, Chapters 90-150* (Thomas Nelson Pub., Nashville, TN, 1991), p. 15

recognized a significant difference between God and man. God is infinite, eternal, but men turn back to dust. Their days are only a flicker in eternity. The Psalmist represents God as the actual determiner of all events that come to pass. Death is the wages of sin. Death is the sacrament of sin. It is the public and visible sign that we are sinners and that we are fallen short of the glory of God.⁹

To get a sense of the seriousness of sin consider what Moses witnessed. Numbers 20 records that Moses' sister, Miriam, died. Moses' brother, Aaron, died. Moses sinned against God by striking the rock, resulting in Moses dying in the wilderness. Every one faces God's judgment, which is death.

Moses also witnessed that every person 20 years old and older who came out of Egypt died in the wilderness (Num. 14:29), with two exceptions: Caleb and Joshua (Num. 26:65). Exodus 12:37 records that about 600,000 men left Egypt. Figuring 1,200,000 (600,000 of both men and women) as having to die in 38½ years, gives 85 people per day. Allowing 12 hours per day maximum for funerals, gives an average of 7 funerals per hour, a continuous foreboding reminder of God's punishment upon them for their unbelief and rebellion.¹⁰ Death reminds us of the rebellion of humanity against their Creator.

Our brevity is determined by God (vs. 4). God is the eternal God. He never had a beginning, and can never have an end. He is above all distinctions of time. Past, present, and future are all equally present to Him. God thinks of these terms only in relation to His creatures. For God Himself, all is an eternal present. All points in created time are equally present to Him. The Psalm expresses this truth, not in abstract philosophical terms, but by the figure of a thousand years compared to a watch in the night.¹¹ The measure of man.

2. The mortality of man (90:5-6) is expressed with three metaphors. Our duration is like a sudden flood, an illusion of a dream, and grass that is mowed. As when a torrent rushes down the river-bed and bears all before it, so does the Lord bear away by death the succeeding generations. Before God men must appear as unreal as the dreams of the night, the phantoms of sleep. Not only are our plans and devices like sleep, but we ourselves are such. As grass is green in the morning and hay at night, so men are changed from health to corruption in a few hours. Here is the history of the grass – sown, grown, blown, mown, gone; and the history of man is not much more. What is there upon earth more frail than we? The mortality of man.

3. The miseries of man (90:7-11) are outlined as two: the final cause is man's sin (vs. 7-9), and the operative cause is God's wrath (vs. 10-11).

The final cause is man's sin. We cannot always say that death in a specific case is proof of the direct and special anger of God *in that case*; but we can say that death always, and death in its general features, may and should be regarded as an evidence of the Divine displeasure against the sins of men. Verse 7 (*For we have been consumed by Your anger, And by Your wrath we are terrified*) expresses the vigor of God's wrath and we are without resources. Verse 8 (*You have set our iniquities before You, Our secret sins in the light of Your countenance*) expresses the justice of God's wrath and we are without excuse.

⁹ Liam Goligher, **As a Tale That Is Told**, Psalm 90, 06/21/2020, Tenth Presbyterian Church, Philadelphia, PA, www.sermon.com

¹⁰ Leon Wood, **A Survey of Israel's History** (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 1970), p. 159, n. 80

¹¹ J.G. Vos, **The Unchanging God**, *Blue Banner Faith and Life*, Jul.-Sept., 1967, Vol. 22, No. 3, p. 121

Some would represent God as passing by sin, because He is too loving to keep His word of threatening against transgressors. The wrath of God is the result of man's guilt. We have only ourselves to blame in that we are the prey of death. Our sad life and speedy death would be inexplicable if it were not that revelation tells us "the wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23). So deep-seated is our corruption that there are depths of sin in us explored by God alone. Even a believer, though not conscious of sin, dares not to acquit himself as if he were free from it before God. But we recognize that truth that Paul states in 1 Corinthians 4:4-5, "He who judges is the Lord." Therefore the believer judges "nothing before the time, until the Lord come, who both will bring to light the hidden things of darkness, and will make manifest the counsels of the hearts."

God not only punishes for our notorious and scandalous sins, which His honor is obliged to do, but even the secret lusts, murmuring, unbelief, apostasy, and idolatry of the heart. Though these are hid from the eyes of men, they are set before God and brought to light by His judgments (vs. 8).

The first sentence of verse 9 is not intended for believers to quote, as though it applied to them, for our days are all passed amid the loving-kindness of the Lord, even as David says in the twenty-third Psalm, "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life."¹²

The operative cause is God's wrath. Our life expectancy (vs. 10) is contrasted to the patriarchs who lived before the Flood, some to almost 1,000 years, but is nothing when contrasted with eternity. Yet life is long enough for virtue and piety, and all too long for vice and blasphemy.

Man generally does not pay attention to the divine law of sin and retribution (vs. 11). One reason for this is that the full brunt of God's anger is withheld and unknown to man. The frustrations in life are explained away or accepted as long as there are not too many problems. The greatness of God's wrath should evoke fear, and that fear should be commensurate with God's wrath. Scripture, when it depicts God's wrath against sin, never uses an hyperbole: it would be impossible to exaggerate God's wrath.¹³

How great is God's anger? It is as great as the gap between the honor He deserves and the honor we actually give Him. How much honor does He deserve? The infinite power and perfection of God everlasting deserve complete obedience and total adoration. How much honor do we actually give Him? Not much. Now, if someone deserves a small amount of honor, it might be a small sin not to honor him. But if you dishonor and disobey Someone whose honor is infinite and eternal, your sin is infinitely horrible. God's majesty and might and honor are infinite and everlasting, and so His wrath against those who fail to honor Him is also infinite and everlasting. That is why the just punishment for sin is not just physical death but also everlasting anguish in hell. His wrath is as great as the fear that is due Him.

But who really believes this? Who knows the power of God's anger? Do you? Do you know how fierce and fiery God's fury against evil really is? Do you have a fear of God that matches the force of His wrath? Ironic as it may sound, the more we fear God, the less we

¹² C.H. Spurgeon, **The Treasury of David**, Vol. 2, Part 2 (MacDonald Pub. Com., McLean, VA), p. 63

¹³ Frank E. Gaebelin, **The Expositor's Bible Commentary**, Vol. 5 (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 1991), p.596

have to fear; and the less we fear Him, the more we ought to be afraid.¹⁴ The miseries of man.

This central section of Psalm 90 -- which lists the measure, mortality, and miseries of man -- gives us a sense of the gravity of God.

C. THE GRACE OF GOD (90:12-17)

Once we see our frailty in the light of God's eternity and our sinfulness in the light of His holiness, then we can also join Moses in asking the Lord to relent and turn aside His wrath and deal with us in mercy.

The third movement in Psalm 90 expresses the grace of God. We may identify four petitions: a prayer for wisdom, for mercy, for joy, and for blessing.

1. Prayer for wisdom (90:12). The wisdom meant is that which flows from a right consideration of the brevity of life, and our guiltiness as the cause of God's anger against us; and consists in "fearing God" and "departing from evil" (Job 28:28).

John Calvin made some striking remarks about "numbering our days." Calvin said that even small children know how to count on their fingers, but we're too stupid to count how short our life is. Some people are experts in arithmetic, said Calvin, and "can precisely and accurately understand and investigate millions of millions," but they can't seem to count to eighty. It is "a monstrous thing," Calvin added, that people can measure how many feet the moon is from the earth and how far planets are from each other, yet they can't measure seventy years in their own case.¹⁵ We must pray for wisdom.

2. Prayer for mercy (90:13). God is said to *repent* when, having first vindicated His justice in punishing sin, He then gives the sinner joy instead of sadness. The language is phenomenal, and relates to things as they *appear to us*. God is the same unchanging God of justice and of love alike when He comforts us as when He punishes. We must pray for mercy.

3. Prayer for joy (90:14-15). The prayer is based upon a great principle in providential goodness, by which the Lord puts the good over against the evil in due measure. Great trial enables us to bear great joy, and may be regarded as the herald of extraordinary grace. God's dealings are according to scale; small lives are small throughout; and great histories are great both in sorrow and happiness. Where there are high and great histories they are great both in sorrow and happiness. Where there are high hills there are also deep valleys. We must pray for joy.

4. Prayer for blessing (90:16-17). It is worthy of notice that this prayer was answered in more than one way. Though the first generation fell in the wilderness, yet the labors of Moses and his companions were blessed in the second generation. These were the most devoted to God of any generation that Israel ever saw.

A greater blessing for following generations was the compiling and completion of the Pentateuch, "the book of Moses,"¹⁶ the first five books of the Old Testament (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy). The chronicle of what happen before Moses is

¹⁴ David Feddes, **God Everlasting**, Psalm 90:2, *The Radio Pulpit*, Dec., 1997, Vol. 42, No.12, p. 40-41

¹⁵ David Feddes, **God Everlasting**, Psalm 90:2, *The Radio Pulpit*, Dec., 1997, Vol. 42, No.12, p. 41

¹⁶ 2 Chronicles 25:4; 35:12; Ezra 6:18; Nehemiah 13:1; Mark 12:26

recorded in Genesis, and in Moses' lifetime the pivotal deliverance of God's people with the revelation of God's law is recounted. Moses' literary work literally appeared to God's servants.

In a similar spirit we ask God to establish the work of our hands, though we may not behold its results. Our comfort in sowing is the belief that our children should reap.

In the most profound way, our Lord Jesus is beholding the work of His hands by His atoning sacrifice, as Isaiah 53:11 prophesied, "He shall see the labor of His soul, and be satisfied. By His knowledge My righteous Servant shall justify many, For He shall bear their iniquities."

His closing prayer is something that he repeats. It is a prayer that he offers twice. It is a double petition. It is the climax of the psalm. He repeats himself which is the biblical way of adding an exclamation mark. Think of the way this prayer was answered in the life of Jesus Christ. He trusted His Father to build the church, to raise Him from the dead, to send out His Spirit to do His work in the world.

Moses asked God to alleviate their sorrows and bring refreshment to the people. Because life is short, and most of their lives had been spent striving in the wilderness, Moses asked God to show them compassion. Likewise, we should not be impatient for Christ to come, for although it seems like a long time, it is not so long for God. In the meantime, we would keep our lives in accordance with God's ways, that we might be happy and joyful during the brief time we spend on earth. A prayer for wisdom, mercy, joy, and blessing conclude the section on the grace of God.

Conclusion: Before his conversion, Martin Luther admitted that he could not read through Psalm 90. When he was a monk he said that when he came to Psalm 90 he put the book down. He could not take it anymore. He became aware of his own brief life and of God's just judgment. It drove him to despair. But afterward Luther understood the gospel. God's anger was intended to bring about our salvation. God dealt with His anger by heaving it on His own Son, Jesus Christ. Jesus knows the anger of God for His people so that they would not experience God's wrath.¹⁷

Therefore, humble yourself before God everlasting. Admit your sin. Trust in Jesus. Rest in God's promise to give eternal life to all who believe in Him. Then honor and obey the Lord and seek His glory above all else.

God is working out His eternal purposes throughout all the universe, throughout all of history, throughout all the earth. He is a great God and so you are living out life today in the context, in the realm of God achieving His eternal purposes.¹⁸

Not only worldly people, but many church members, fail to take God seriously. The modern church has been vaccinated with a mild variety of Christianity and is now immune to the real thing. Our easy-going, informal, convenient religion does not take God seriously.

¹⁷ Paul Ipema, **Our Refuge from the Stormy Blast**, Psalm 90, 10/23/2011, Community United Reformed Church, Schererville, IN, www.sermonaudio.com

¹⁸ Don Green, **A Biblical Perspective on the Brevity of Life**, Psalm 90, 09/01/2013, Truth Community Church, Cincinnati, OH, www.sermonaudio.com

Only when God is reckoned with at every point in life do we really take Him seriously.¹⁹

The message of Psalm 90 is not “work harder.” There is no comfort in that. Rather, the message is that because God has worked to create and to preserve a covenant people, He will bless us and bless the work of our hands. Here is the beginning of real wisdom and real comfort.²⁰

Our priority is to enter into God's eternal purpose for our life. That eternal purpose is for us to be with Christ, for us to be with the one who bought us with His own blood. That is what we want. Death is simply the entrance into the appointment that God had for us before the beginning of time, for us to be with Christ forever. So the apostle Paul confesses in Philippians 1:21, “For to me, to live *is* Christ, and to die *is* gain.” Is this true for you? Live in the light of eternity. God's greatness, gravity, and grace is revealed in a pilgrim's prayer.

Prayer: Eternal God, the only refuge of the afflicted, seeing that the shortness of this present life admonishes us to turn ourselves away from earthly things and to have our meditation on heavenly matters, grant unto us that we may employ our whole life on the consideration of thy mercy and goodness; and that thine anger may be so turned from us that we may have continually wherewith to rejoice in thee, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.²¹

Psalter Selection: 39A, 27A, 90C vs. 1-4; 90C vs.5-8

Scripture reading: Hebrews 11:8-13; Psalm 90:1-17

Henri F. Hemy in 1865 wrote a poem based on Psalm 90.²²

Lord, Thou has been our dwelling place / Through all the ages of our race;
Before the mountains had their birth, / Or ever Thou hast formed the earth,
From everlasting Thou art God, / To everlasting our abode.

O teach Thou us to count our days / And set our hearts on wisdom's ways;
Turn, Lord, to us in our distress, / In pity now Thy servants bless;
Let mercy's dawn dispel our night, / And all our day with joy be bright.

O send the day of joy and light, / For long has been our sorrow's night;
Afflicted through the weary years, / We wait until Thy help appears;
With us and with our sons abide, / In us let God be glorified.

So let there be on us bestowed / The beauty of the Lord our God;
The work accomplished by our hand / Establish Thou, and make it stand;
Yea, let our hopeful labor be / Established evermore by Thee.

¹⁹ Cf. J.G. Vos, **The Unchanging God**, *Blue Banner Faith and Life*, Jul.-Sept., 1967, Vol. 22, No. 3, p. 122

²⁰ Godfrey, **Learning to Love the Psalms** (Reformation Trust Publishing, Sanford, FL, 2017), p. 169

²¹ *Prayers on the Psalms: From the Scottish Psalter 1595*, The Banner of Truth Trust, p. 104

²² **The Hymnbook**, Published by Presbyterian Church in the United States, The United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., Reformed Church in America, 1955, #88