

The Lord is eternal but man’s days are brief and fragile—filled with toil, trouble, and terror of divine wrath for our many sins—but God will soon return to bless his people by revealing to us his glorious work, redeeming our work, and teaching us to number our days. Rejoice in the wisdom of humility!

Introduction – In my last pastoral letter to you as a congregation, I mentioned that I had to cut short my last unit of Psalms sermons because I’ve run out of time. “So much to say, so little time” was my lament.

Background – Book 3 of the Psalms can be called the Book of Exile. Its overarching themes are personal and national devastation. The last two psalms of Book 3 give voice to the horrific cry of exiles under the judgment of God for their sins. Psalm 90 is the joyful morning that follows a tear-drenched night.

I. Profession of Secure Faith

A. In the Lord, not the kingdom, as our dwelling place (v. 1)

The author, Moses “the man of God,” enjoyed a more special relationship with God than any other person in the Old Testament (Deuteronomy 33:1; Joshua 14:6). During his middle 40 years Moses lived *in exile*, and his last 40 years *in exodus* en route to the Promised Land via the wilderness. For his first 40 years he lived as a prince of Egypt, but in his last 80 years as the man of God who knew what it meant to live without a home. Moses learned through affliction how to make the Lord his dwelling place. Later Psalm 90 was placed at the beginning of Book 4 in the Psalter to teach us about our ultimate security.

B. In God as everlasting (v. 2)

Why is the Lord our home, our habitation, our refuge, our dwelling place? Because he is eternal. God exists eternally—from everlasting to everlasting (Psalms 45:76; 93:2; 102:25-27; cf. Genesis 1:1; 21:33; Isaiah 40:28). The Lord has always been God and his everlasting-ness proves he will always be God. Eternality and immutability are the basis of God’s faithfulness to us because he does not change nor will he ever change. Here is a reminder of this truth that rarely affects us: that God’s work of creation brought the heavens and the earth (indeed the whole universe!) into being (Genesis 1). He is the source and cause of everything—every single thing that ever was, is, or ever will be. How is this true? Because God has always been and forever will be there (WCF 2.1; WLC 7; WSC 4).

II. Lament about Human Life

A. Life is oh so brief (vv. 3-6)

Human life is so brief from the perspective of eternity. The days and years are likened to a dream. Here’s another comparison: your life is like the new grass of the morning that fades quickly. A dream and morning grass are impersonal forces don’t really sweep people away. Withering grass and the passage of time like a dream are gentle, passive images, But the days of our lives are also likened to a flood. A flood conveys the irresistibility of death with a picture of God’s active involvement in returning man to the dust. Not only is your life brief and fragile, but it is easily destroyed.

B. Life ends like a dreadful groan (vv. 7-9)

Life is brief and death is irresistible because of the curse of sin. The reason why God sweeps man away like a flood is his anger against sin. It’s not just the obvious wrongs we do, or other people’s moral failings, or the rotten institutions that sustain ecosystems of injustice. God sees all sins. Every single one. Even our “secret sins” (v. 8). Secret sins can be those transgressions that you hide from others. But they can also be hidden from yourself—you might call them blindspot sins (Psalm 19:13).

C. Life is a tale of toil and trouble (vv. 10-11)

While “toil and trouble” is an exaggeration characterizing all human years, the fallen human condition may accurately be described that way (cf. Psalms 16:2; 51:4; 73:25). God’s wrath toward his unfaithful people is in accordance with their “fear” of God that they should ideally have (Proverbs 1:7). Who considers God’s anger according to the fear of the Lord? By God’s accounting only Jesus really does. He drank the full cup of God’s holy wrath due to us for sin when his years were cut short on the cross of toil and trouble and terror. Only Jesus knows the full power of death. Such a promising life, cut off in his prime years. What a groan he whispered by his dying breath: “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.” Behold the toil and trouble and terrors of life he endured, and as the only one who did nothing to deserve such an end of days. Look to him as Savior.

III. Prayer for Blessed Humility

A. Come and teach us to number our days that we might gain wisdom (vv. 12-13)

If God teaches us to number our days, then we may gain (literally “harvest”) wisdom. The idea is that we take advantage of our short lives here on earth to cultivate, sow, and reap a Christ-oriented life—a life resting on Jesus that is your foundation “all the way down” (1 Kings 3:12; Psalm 25:4-6; Proverbs 16:23; Ecclesiastes 8:5; 10:2). Start by fleeing to God’s shelter in Christ for forgiveness and blessing in this life and the next. And build all your hopes, dreams, and decisions on the fact that in eternity, only Jesus and the gospel matter. Because he is from everlasting to everlasting. To wisely number your days, pay attention to God’s ways every day. Make your days count since they are so few.

B. Cancel out our years of affliction with days of gladness from now on (vv. 14-15)

Imagine those singing this psalm crying out in the dark of night, looking eagerly to dawn’s light (cf. Psalms 30:5; 46:5; 59:16; 130:6; 143:8). The hope of restoration for those who suffer comes “in the morning” when God will show his steadfast covenant love to his people (Psalm 88:13). Ultimately God answers the prayer “How long?” with the resurrection of Jesus Christ (Psalm 49:14; Romans 5:2-5; 8:18; 2 Corinthians 4:16-18). Because of the hope of resurrection life through faith in Christ, we can really and truly have a measure of satisfaction in this life. God can replace years of trouble with years of good. He promises to restore the years the locusts have devoured (Joel 2:25).

C. Show us the glory of your work and establish the significance of our work (vv. 16-17)

When we lower our eyes from eternity’s horizon and focus on this life, our options for gaining immortality are limited to our children and our achievements. However, from the perspective of forever, only God can give the glory and significance we so desperately want to leave behind, because only God is eternal. He must work. In the context of right here and now, we can pray Psalm 90 as Christians—that God would establish our work in the land of the living. God promises from everlasting to everlasting that all men and women who are united to the Everlasting Man Jesus Christ will also rise from the dead in resurrection life. Through Christ who is our dwelling place, our shelter from the wrath of God against sinners, God bestows eternal significance to the deeds wrought by hands that serve him humble, faithfulness, and prayerfully.

Conclusion – When Christians feel like life is lamentable, they are tempted either to depression or delusion. If you’re depressed, take heart that your days are numbered. Pray verses 14 and 15 and believe God will satisfy you in the morning, particularly in Christ’s resurrection morning, with his steadfast covenant life-giving love. If for you the future’s so bright you gotta wear shades, then make sure the Lord is your dwelling place, that you’re not delusional by sheltering in anyone or anything else. Lay hold of verses 11 and 12 and be reminded of the costliness of Christ’s love for sinners. Learn to number your days to harvest the hard-won wisdom that Jesus freely gives to the humble. And may God grant us as a church the prayer requests of verses 16 and 17. Amen.