

A PSALM OF MORTAL LIMITATIONS

Psalm 90

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Psalm 90:1–17 (NIV)

“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, O 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, and we fly 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 may 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.”

This is known as one of the great psalms of the Bible. It is a psalm that you have frequently heard at a funeral service. Because many times people who attend memorial services are

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unfamiliar with the terminology of Scripture, I find myself only reading the first six 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 misplaced or misdirected anger of someone they know in family, it doesn’t at times seem appropriate, because it requires so much in translation.

The psalm, in its entirety, is integral to our faith and our worship of the Lord. It is interesting that we would use this psalm at memorial services and at grave sides, since in the Old Testament time and indeed in Jewish life today, this is a psalm that is frequently used in the burial of the dead. It is the Old Testament.

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 on 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).

I. First, the eternity of God.

A powerful declaration 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.

A. Verse 1 is his contrast 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 more frequently than our residencies do today. I’ve been a person who, up until my adult life, lived in many different places. I think I can remember all the places I have lived, from about the age of five 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

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and tissue, nerves, skin and blood. Our real home is in God. In Him we live and move and have our being.

So right away the difference between God and ourselves is set forth in that 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 that 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" (Acts 17:28).

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. That life in God always exists, and we are never dislodged from our true dwelling place.

This psalm is teaching us, right off the bat, 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's meant, instead, to be the answer to our brevity. Rather than a put down 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 and the answer to our brevity is in our residence in Him.

B. The eternity of God is also set forth in the creation by telling us before the mountains were born, "Before the mountains were born or you brought forth the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God" (Psalm 90:2). The Scriptures bear witness to an uncreated God who stands behind everything 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 has helped us anew to get a fix on how great God is. Perhaps we

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know even more about the greatness of God because we know Moses did not know of the magnitude of the universe in which we live.

God exists outside of all of that. Outside of time and space. “Before matter came into being. Before the mountains were born or you brought forth the earth and the universe, you from everlasting to everlasting are God.”

The dimensions of God’s eternity are such, however, that it doesn’t take a prayer light years to reach God. 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.

II. 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 we’re compared to is not very complimentary.

A. We are compared to dust. “You turn men back to dust” (verse 3). That reminds us of the phrase in Genesis 3:19, “For dust you are and to dust you will return.”

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

B. Our time is compared to a day. “For a thousand years in your sight are like a day that has just gone by” (Psalm 90:3). A thousand years with God are as a day. That analogy—if I live seventy years, that takes up about nine and a half seconds of God’s time. I am mortal and passing.

C. If the brevity of my life as 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, to a 4-hour period of time. So our life span is now not compared just to a day, but to a watch for 4 hours. On that scale, we only take up a second and a half of God’s time.

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

D. The fourth analogy the psalmist gives of the mortality of our life is that we are like the new grass of the morning.

What effect does God's eternity and our mortality have upon us when we see God's greatness in light of his existence in creation and when we see our mortality? What kind of response is being asked for in us?

III. That is the theme of verses 7–12: 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.

A. 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 upon the human race that is sure. There is a 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 persons who are facing disaster. When we consider the magnitude and greatness of God in our own mortality, we are confronted with terror. Being overwhelmed.

Anyone who has come face to face with death in their own life, even as a Christian, has perhaps faced that moment of absolute, sheer terror.

The psalmist is presenting to us the real psychological impact of the judicial death sentence of God upon the human race. We face that sentence with terror.

B. That produces a second effect in us. The effect of inexcusability. Verse 8 says, "You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your presence." When we try to stand up

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and argue with you and beg off from this sentence, we recognize immediately that none but the righteous and the person who is full of integrity and without sin may approach you. But how can we approach you when you have access even to our hidden thoughts and to our secret things which are not of you?

C. That then brings rise to a third effect in our life: anguish. “All our days pass away under your wrath. We finish our years with a moan” (Psalm 90:9). What a description of death—anguish. However witty and articulate we may be in life, in death we are not. I have never been in the presence of a person facing death, I have never found anyone who was witty, articulate, joking and in their best mind as they were dying. There is the sense that no matter how much of the gift of intelligence and charm we have in life, death saps it from us. Indeed when you are ill, you begin to want to turn loose and to go. The psalmist said it long ago. It ends with a moan.

Anguish.

D. The fourth effect of our mortality is the limitation it places upon us. “The length of our days is seventy years—or eighty, if we have the strength” (verse 10). This is not a contract guaranteeing the number of our years. Jesus only had thirty-three years. But it is simply another illustration of the brevity of our life. What, in contrast to the eternity of God, are seventy or, if by reason of strength, we have eighty or more? That produces then the fifth response.

E. The fifth effect in our life is one of reflection. Verses 11–12 say, “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 and we know the anguish.

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So the Scriptures tell us that 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" (verse 12). The reflection.

If the psalm ended there, it would end really on a down note. But it ends on the up.

IV. 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's a prayer for his grace. Now that we know God's eternity and our mortality, we cry out to a personal God. 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.

A. It requests compassion. In verse 3, you will find the psalmist saying of God, "You turn man back to dust." The Hebrew in verse 13 is the same, "Relent, 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 a second request the psalmist knows God will answer.

B. Satisfying love. Once the Lord turns and has compassion on his servants, the psalmist says, "Satisfy us in the morning with your unfailing love" (Psalm 90:14). We have already found out that in the morning, verse 6, we spring up only to be dry and withered by the evening. But this is a different morning—a morning that is meant to characterize all our days. A morning when we are sustained by God's unfailing love. "His loving-kindness" is the way other translations put it. There's a difficulty in translating the Hebrew word that stands for "loving-kindness" or "unfailing love."

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C. We ask God for life, thinking of quantity. He answers by not just giving us quantity, but giving us quality. Who wants to live forever, if forever you're going to have to face the same problems, stresses that you're facing now? 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" (Psalm 90:15). Probably, Moses is thinking about the forty years in the wilderness. "Lord, make it up to us."

D. There's this theme of recompensing joy. It's a modest prayer. "Lord, would you please give us enough joy to balance our sorrow, so 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. Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 4:17, "For our light and momentary troubles 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 have been afflicted. But He is going to give us an overcompensation of joy for everything that we have gone through.

Recompensing and over-recompensing of joy.

E. 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 of 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 about the last request: "Establish the work of our hands."

One, the meaning of that verse from its scriptural setting. In Sinai today, where this psalm was written, you find the Bedouin, the drifter, the nomad. The Bedouin who live in the tents and who take the flocks of goats from one place to another, as the seasons change. The Bedouins who

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don't build things, who don't farm, who don't go to school, many of whom still do not—in spite of the change among the Bedouins in Saudi Arabia. The Bedouins of Sinai are still a migrant people.

Abraham had started out as a migrant, much like the Bedouin today, moving and pasturing his flocks from place to place. He was not a builder himself—living in tents. Same with Isaac and with Jacob. 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 in the desert sands and who, when their generation is gone, no one can ever tell that they have been there—except the most astute, who will be remembered. Unlike them, Moses is now leading a people who are going to be builders. He is saying, “Lord, 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 that believer after believer are falling by the wayside today. If we have ever prayed the prayer “Lord, establish the work of our hands. Establish the work of our hands!”—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 that 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, that is hitting lives, left and right. In the name of the Lord, we ought to

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ask, as never before, “O God, establish the work of our hands. Don’t let us check out. Keep me true, Lord Jesus! Help me to run the race at whatever age I’m in. Lord, help me to run the race that, having begun, I might finish it. Don’t let me be a castaway. Don’t let what I have done be in vain. 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 intact 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 when it will help us live more diligently for Christ. We must keep our eyes on the Lord and have a relationship and faith that is based on God, that helps 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) was 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 entering into the Holy Land, “We’re 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 are no longer wanderers. Drifters. But God has called us to a beautiful and a high calling of working for Him and seeing our life count for eternity. Let’s keep true to the Lord.

Closing Prayer

Father, in just a few short years, if You tarry, this psalm 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. Lord, in the day when we want to place an emphasis on what’s

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upbeat, what makes for positive living, when we want to think good thoughts and have warm fuzzies, You really mess up our day by reminding us of our mortality. Thank You for messing up our day. Thank You for creating in us the humility we need to have in the face of an eternal God. Help us, Lord, 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 Your life and Your body, which will produce good fruit in us. Save us from the endless circle of chasing ourselves and our own self-satisfaction. 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 we know, that Moses never had. The compassion in You that is so great that You sent Jesus for us. Love that is so satisfying, that can only be described by John 3:16. The joy that is so great that the Father says that “for one who comes to me, there is rejoicing by the angels in heaven” (Luke 15:7). We thank You for the visible results that You give and the lasting result in this day when the enemy seeks to wreck Your body from within. To pick off, leader after leader, through outright betrayal and apostasy or through perversion, through an emphasis upon things that are not of You and a lifestyle that smacks of material Christianity and show business. When Your enemy seeks to pick off the leadership and to make Christians the laughing stock of the world. Give integrity to Your body and to Your people. Give us staying power. Help us, like an army under siege, to remain at our post until either the time has come for You to relieve us from that position or until the reinforcements have arrived to take higher ground. Keep us true. There are pressures, Lord, upon each of us in this room. Pressures in the spiritual world and pressures that affect us in every arena of our life. If the story of each one of us were told, each one of us could give testimony that the enemy has tried to pick us off and keep Your work from prospering in us.

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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.